

MARIA OVCHAROVA

Beshkov and Altmaier

*Fragments
of a Friendship
1934–1955*



*In memory of Anastasia Beshkova,
without whose commitment
this book would never have been published!*

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of a
Friendship
1934–1955*

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National Museum of Bulgarian Books
and Polygraphy

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Il ya souvenirs - toi à toi et à
Vus

Jacob Altmaier and Ilia Beshkov, October 3rd, 1934, Sofia

FOLLOWING THE TRACKS OF A JEW EXILED FROM NAZI GERMANY

His name was Jacob Altmaier.¹

Information about him which I succeeded to gather was sketchy. He was born in Germany, of Jewish extraction. Journalist by profession. Party affiliation – Social Democrat. Exiled from Germany in 1933 by the Nazi authorities. Sojourned in Yugoslavia with not precisely valid IDs.

In 1934 he had to arrive in Bulgaria for some time. He stayed at Bulgarian painter Ilia Beshkov's (1901–58) home for eight or so weeks. Later he returned to Belgrade. From the letters kept it transpires that he went to Switzerland and France. He took part in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) in his capacity of a reporter. The last news of him: he was an MP at Germany's Bundestag.

Apart from preserved documents, I was furnished with information about Jacob Altmaier by three of his personal acquaintances: Mrs. Anastasia Beshkova (1903–88), wife of Ilia Beshkov who remembered that a friend of her husband, Altmaier stayed with them in the fall of 1934 in their house at 6, Ivan Asen II Street in Sofia, for a couple of months. They did not inform neighbours or acquaintances who the guest was or where he came from. His sojourn was reportedly legal, yet there was something alarming about him. She herself never asked a question. Beshkov and Altmaier felt a strong affection for each other. They used to understand each other very well despite the language barrier. The guest was very fond of their infant daughter Pavlina, a one-year-old at the time. He used to get engrossed in playing with her. He was a refined, well-mannered, intelligent, tender and nice person.

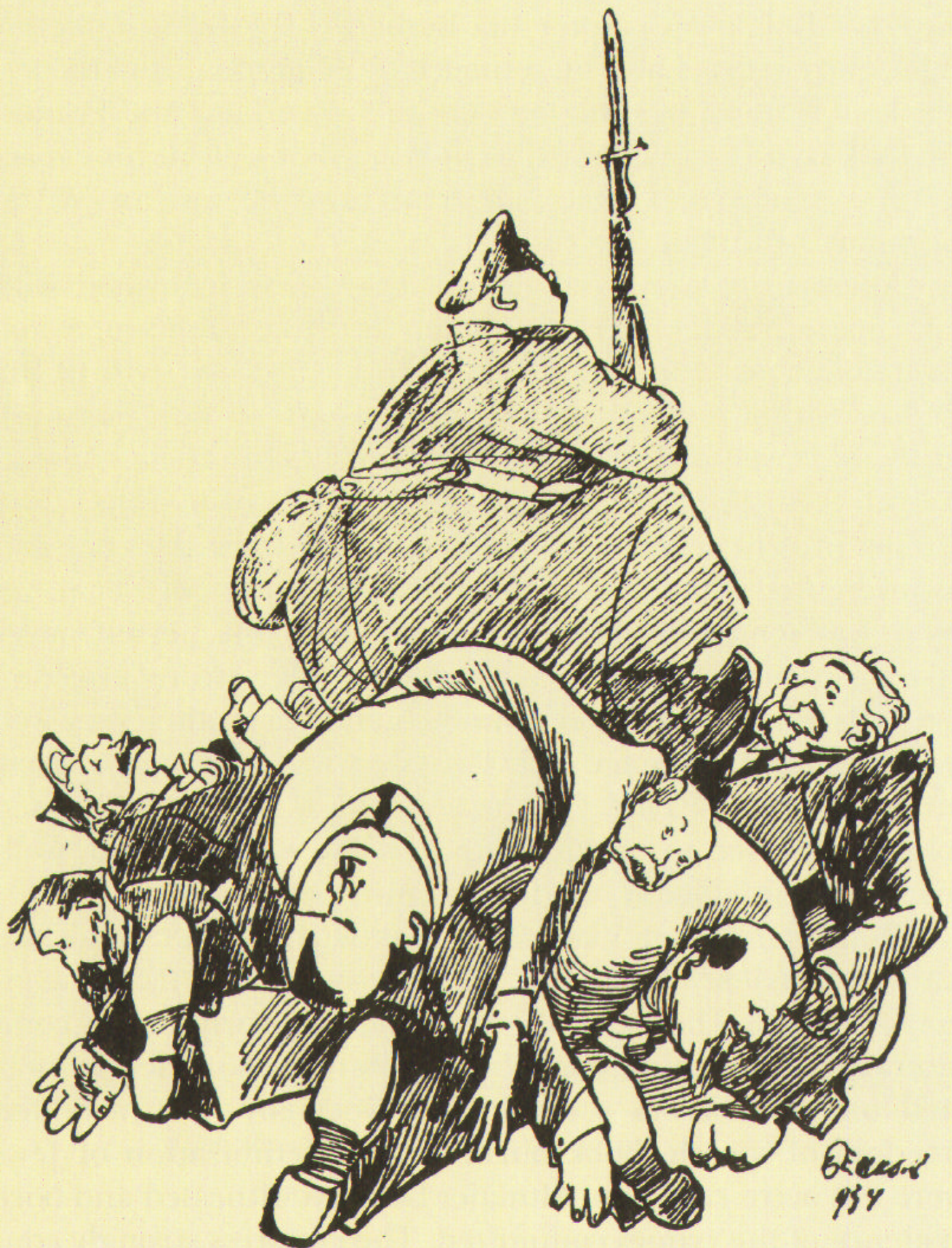
Bulgarian writer Vladimir Polianov (1899–1988) was also Altmaier's friend. They met in Dubrovnik at a P.E.N. congress in 1933. The exile attended the event where the commonwealth of men of letters from different countries deliberated on the horrors occurring in Germany. Downtrodden freedom of speech, book burning and victimization of Jews were not mere rumours. Altmaier both eyewitnessed and bore evidence of the crimes committed. The congress strongly condemned those.

Vladimir Polianov was a militant of the Zveno political cir-

cle, which in conjunction with the Military League staged a coup on May 19th, 1934 in Sofia.

At the time, the writer being not yet disappointed believed in the platform of Zveno with its underlying principle of the country's "national revival". For this reason he acceded to be appointed an official in the *Obnova* (Renovation).²

May 19th



"We'd approach our Congresses on the issue of non-partisan power; until then we render our invaluable cooperation."

The Pladne newspaper, April 2nd, 1934

In July Beshkov received a letter from Yugoslavia: poet Gustav Krklec asked friends in Sofia to shelter Altmaier for a while so as to be on the safe side. The idea came to fruition. The emigrant stayed at the Beshkovs', however, Polianov in his capacity of an official succeeded in arranging for him appointments with high-level figures from the new power-vested.

Altmaier in his capacity of *The Manchester Guardian* reporter (he had the due papers to certify that) interviewed Premier Kimon Georgiev and the motor of the coup, Gen. Damian Velchev (Altmaier called the latter "a goner".) It was Altmaier's lucky chance – a cogent reason for his stay in Bulgaria. Besides, the interviewees, power-vested coup-stagers were only happy with the fact as they searched to receive international recognition. Publications in *The Manchester Guardian* came to facilitate their aspirations.

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Polianov depicted Altmaier's personality in bright expressions: "A personable man, suave, affectionate and kind-hearted!"

After a poetry reading, held at the Sofia-based museum of Bulgarian poet Peyo Yavorov, I, Mrs. Beshkova and writer Polianov remained in the hall. The two of them recollected Altmaier, specifying who accompanied him where, which of the pubs he used to frequent. They failed to call to mind who showed him the country. The opinion prevailed that it was publisher Philip Tchipev. The guest was enraptured with the time spent at the seaside. He was also very fond of the Divite Petli (Wild Roosters) pub in Sofia. He was cordially received amidst Bulgarian intellectuals...

(I am at a loss as to why Polianov failed to even mention Altmaier in his memoirs and in his *Literary Questionnaire*!)

Sinisa Paunovic was the third one who used to personally know Altmaier. I met the Yugoslavian poet, writer and Bulgarian scholar on October 30th, 1986 at Park Hotel Moskva in Sofia, in the framework of the International Writers' Conference. Being on the wrong side of 80, he proved to be weary, standoffish and uncommunicative. Still, he invited me to his room and answered some of my questions. Translator of works by Bulgarian writers Aleko Konstantinov, Elin Pelin and Yordan Yovkov, he boasted detailed knowledge of Bulgarian culture and artists. He was sorry for the past

“golden days of friendship between the two neighbouring peoples in the 1930s – days of intense contacts, understanding and mutual aid.” He said he was working on those memoirs and he had written over 1,000 pages, titled *My Bulgarian Friends*. In his book, he recounted of Ilia Beshkov, engineer Georgi Vulkov, Vladimir Polianov, Laliu Ganchev among many others. Some of them were supporters of communist ideology, others happened to be staunch followers of agrarian leader Alexander Stamboliiski, yet others were non-partisan rebels, all of them being kind, intelligent and progressive-minded young people. Beshkov used to be very close with poet Gustav Krklec and painter Pierre Krizanic. At the time, a warm-hearted and wealthy person, Dr. Menek Gavrilovic lived in Belgrade. The latter used to support the group of glamorous and gifted yet poor youngsters.

My interlocutor would pause and utter a word or two about himself. He said he was a communist at the time. Paused and added gloomily: “Now I am none!” As about Altmaier, he would not elaborate. I repeated my question and it angered Sinisa Paunovic. He snapped he disliked Altmaier. Yes, the latter was also a member of the group supported by Gavrilovic, yet Paunovic never happened to trust him. The fact that Altmaier pricked up his ears, pumping information from the conversations, irritated him.

He assumed the latter was a British spy. All the more so as, after the end of the war, he settled in West Germany to become an MP in the Bundestag. Paunovic gestured doubtfully and lapsed into silence. The assumption that Altmaier could have been a British spy was hardly grounded. At least nobody shared such suspicions in my presence. Besides, Paunovic failed to provide any reasons for his statement.

“Ilia Beshkov was very kind and trustful,” my interlocutor broke his silence. “This was why he hosted Altmaier.”

I knew better than forget that Beshkov was far from trustful, on the contrary, he was a man of insight. Yet, I did not protest.



Ilia Beshkov. *Self-portrait*

Let's start from the very beginning. It was late in the afternoon on March 4th, 1982. A new in a row gathering opened in the memorial house of writer Angel Karaliichev in Sofia on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Ilia Beshkov. Traditionally, the works by this past master stir great interest. The hall was crowded to the capacity, there were even standees. Artists who had graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in the classes of Prof. Beshkov prevailed with Mana Parapoulova, Zlatka Dubova, Christo Neikov, Todor Tsonev, Anastasia Panayotova among others. Mrs. Beshkova and her son, Alexander Beshkov also attended the event.

Maximilian Kirov, a painter and art reviewer presided over the festive gathering. A deeply moving and meaningful conversation was held. Different opinions were shared focusing on ideas of how to preserve and promote the heritage of Ilia Beshkov. Prioritizing proved to be the issue of publishing the archives of the painter, kept by his wife. Each of those cognizant was aware of what a responsible commitment it was and the enormous efforts it would take to prepare such a publication. Who was to undertake the task? A number of the attendees gazed at me. Presiding Kirov named me to the effect that I had delved into Beshkov's heritage with professionalism and it was me who had to take up the work. I heard approving exclamations. Enthusiastic men and women were explicit that the work had to start as early as the next day...

I wanted to make my opinion vocal, but the attendees wouldn't listen. It got dark outside – five hours had slipped by in animated conversation. Everybody started to leave while I was contemplating how to cope with such a pressing commission. Indeed, I had already defended a doctoral thesis on Beshkov's work and my study *Beshkov: The Painter and Citizen* (1982) was about to be published, yet I had a job and I would see myself forced to work during nighttime hours and in the weekends.

Maximilian Kirov outlined the sequence of volumes of Beshkov's archives to be published by *Bulgarski Pisatel* publishing house. Editor Mikhail Nedelchev was in charge of such

editions at the publishing house, so I was told to contact him...

On the next day, I called on Mrs. Beshkova. The "organization" we established was founded on mutual confidence. Thank God, we had no misunderstandings, no doubts were felt. Anastasia Beshkova picked out a certain number of documents, handed the papers in to me, listing them on plain pieces of paper. I suggested that I ought to put my signature as the "receiver", however, she refused. She used to tick off the lists when I brought the respective documents back. Then we used to have long conversations. My interlocutor was meticulous when answering my questions about the events or persons mentioned in the letters, though always briefly, concisely, omitting any wearisome details or verborities.

I had to often make references to public archives or libraries. I made notes, returning to Mrs. Beshkova, who in her turn arranged appointments for me with Beshkov's contemporaries to gather more information. It was an interesting and absorbing, though slowly progressing and time-consuming process. I was getting familiarized with Beshkov – his milieu and creative environment – both in terms of fact-finding and emotionally. His wife seemed to be rediscovering him. I remember there was a hand-written copy made by her in the envelope of each of his letters to her. I proposed to save her the trouble and make typewritten copies for her. She smiled shyly and explicitly refused, saying: "Oh, no! It is my greatest pleasure and satisfaction to rewrite Ilia's letters to me! No novel or movie could substitute this experience of mine..."

Mrs. Beshkova who had graduated in higher mathematics and was a teacher by profession, was reserved by nature. However, the process of studying the archives revealed her deep emotionality. Her sad childhood had developed in her a strict self-demanding in terms of hard-working, frugality and responsibility. Being the eldest child in a family of six children, she lost her mother early and had to take care of her younger siblings. The death of her little brother was a tragic memory of hers. Her dad, Father Manciple Alexander Tonkov from the eastern town of Dobrich, could not remarry under the Canon Law. He raised his children all by himself with the assistance of his mother. Though at the time the

town of Dobrich was within the bounds of Romania, he succeeded in providing higher education for all of his children – four girls (an architect, a historian, a mathematician and a philologist) and a son (a medical doctor who graduated in France).

The further we proceeded with our researches of the archives, the more the emotional “constraint” of Mrs.



Anastasia Beshkova, 1930

Beshkova was brought to naught. This new communication with her husband, who died 25 years ago, was to her a resurrection sui generis of the artist. His “difficult nature” was no more a problem, as well as the necessity of decision-making in line with everyday life and support. His great personality as a past master, philosopher and person – was more and more coming to the fore, along with his outstanding friends.



On a March 8th, Mrs. Beshkova insistently asked me over the phone to call on her. I found her alone at home. The usual envelopes with archives were not to be seen on the table. She had served sweeties and juice. She was making every effort not to betray her excitement. However, her eyes were exuding unusual for her age light, and her otherwise pallid complexion of an old woman had gained colour.

"I am thinking over my life with Ilia," she said. "I see it as a projection." My interlocutor gestured as if drawing something. The gesture took me back to my own high school years, when I was taught descriptive geometry. I did remember the word "projection", a geometric object on a plane. I had been noticing on more than one occasion that Mrs. Beshkova would use mathematical terms in a philosophic sense.

"If a miracle happened," she went on, "and I saw myself re-living my life with Ilia, our relations would be totally different!"

Silence settled. I asked no "specifying" questions. We both knew what her point was. Still... It had been on my mind for quite a while to ask her as to why she had been sparing of her letters, when she and Beshkov happened to be apart? Why did he see himself forced to send telegrams as that one: "Paris, March 6th, 1939. Awaiting a letter – Ilia"?

"Beshkov has been looking for your letters impatiently," I started shyly and with no need to continue.

"When we fought, I kept silence," Mrs. Beshkova explained. "Or I would have reminded him of unpleasant things. Still, I could have understood him..."

Fights?! The couple fought on a regular basis.

Ivaila Vulkova, (daughter of engineer Georgi Vulkov, publisher of *Pladne* paper where Beshkov used to publish his cartoons) maintained that Sia (thus was Mrs. Beshkova pet-named) was a "martyr", as Beshkov was "difficult by nature". Ivaila elaborated: "Ilia was a genius. Is there sweet-tempered geniuses?"

Soon after they married, Beshkov assured his wife in a letter that the outlooks were they would be "well-off which is so important to you" (September 18th, 1931). No, it was not a reproach. On the contrary, he, being the head of the family,

sought to do his best to secure means of livelihood. Of course, under one condition: never to be forced to compromise on his views and moral principles. An almost unrealizable vow! Nerves get frayed, anger blazes, resulting in conflicts...

I maintained contacts with Anastasia Beshkova for two decades and happened to conceive a deep affection for her. Over the first years after her death I missed her very much. I used to feel an impulse to tell her something but then a pang of pain would sober me up, as I realized she had departed.

Now, I am aware of the great difference between the two spouses. Dramatically different personalities... yet personalities they were! Anastasia Beshkova was a worthy woman and worthy widow of a deceased great. She stood in awe of truth, never lying to me about whatsoever. She would give me letters to copy, often putting her in not exactly favourable light. Her self-criticism struck me. She used to make confessions which were far from favourable to her, without any self-castigation. She made every effort not to distort the truth of Ilia Beshkov's nature.

Given all the aforesaid, I found the answer as to why we started working on Altmaier's archives. It was then that I heard his name for the first time ever. The correspondence preserved was scarce. The two friends used to be separated either by enormous distances or state borders or political regimes. Not to mention the language barrier. They used to "talk" in French. Altmaier was far from fluent in French, as for Beshkov, he knew almost next to nothing. Mrs. Beshkova had a good command of French. It was her, to whom Altmaier told that he had a family back in Germany, that he loved his homeland and longed for it. However, he communicated with Beshkov on another level. First of all, it was the public climate that was of great import: Europe in 1934–55, the period when Bulgarian artist and antifascist Ilia Beshkov and the ethnic German Jew, exiled by Hitler, forced to travel from place to place, from one country to another, developed their friendship. In his letters, Beshkov mentions the name of Altmaier parsimoniously and cautiously. From them we get aware that the two of them met in Belgrade on more than one occasion.



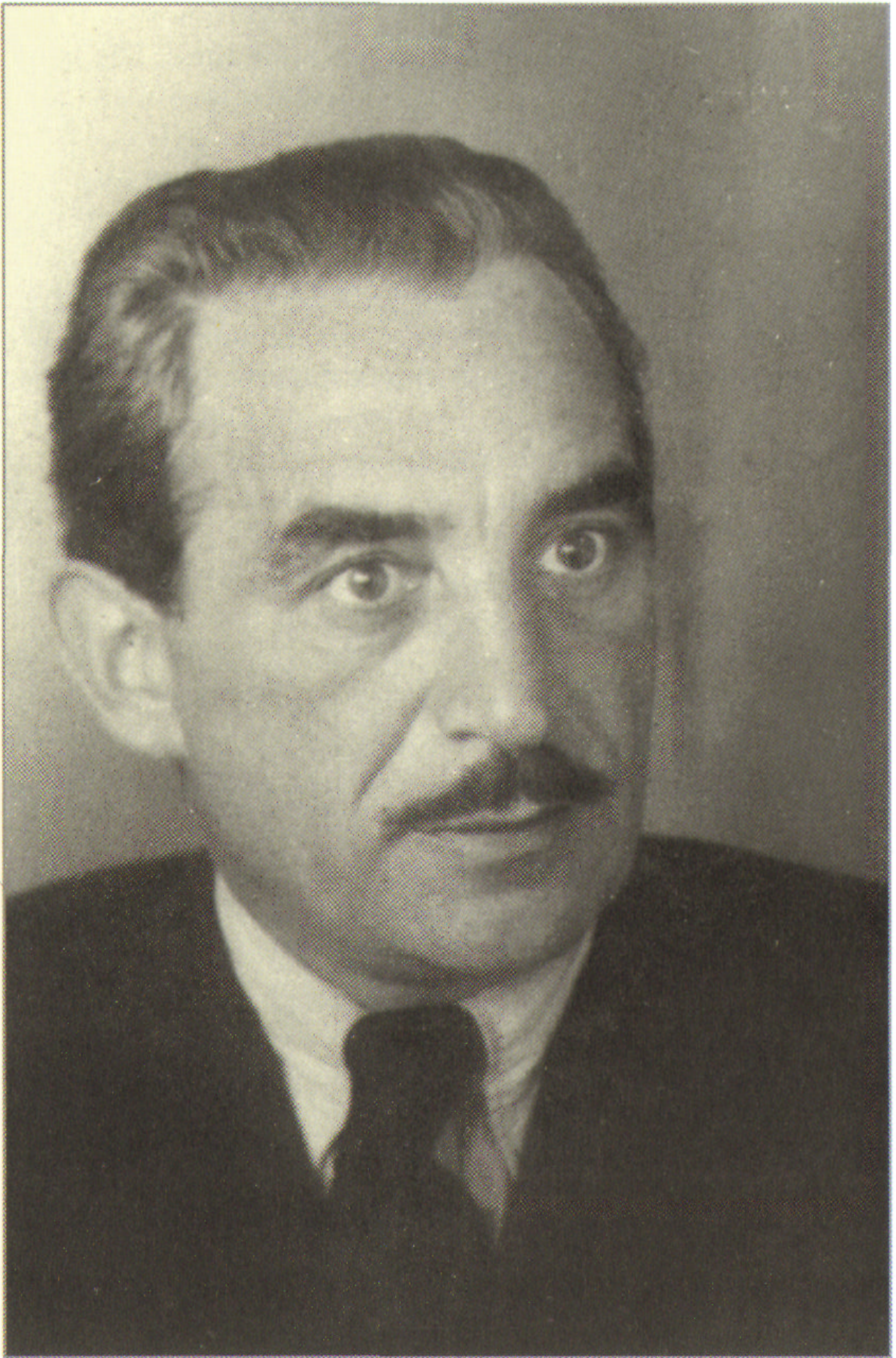
Ilia Beshkov in Paris, 1939

In 1939, the artist won a competition for one-year training in Paris. Altmaier was there at the same time. The latter saw himself forced to take care of Beshkov as for red-tape delays in Bulgaria his monthly grants failed to be transferred on time. The artist had no means and fell ill. From his letter to his wife of March 9th, 1939 from Paris it transpired that Altmaier was to bring an immigrant medical doctor from Austria to economize on costs. Another letter reads: "Yesterday, Altmaier brought in an acquaintance of his, Dr Koerbel, a perfect professional, fluent in Serbian, an Austrian invited now to America, etc. He examined me thoroughly. Nothing special, just extreme frailty. As for the heart, no news to me, yet too nervous too. In end-month (March), I have to call him to reassign me to a colleague of his, manager of a hospital for the latter to have my tonsils either removed or burnt free of charge." (March 12th, 1939)

On March 22nd, 1939 Beshkov once again reports on his illness: "I failed to have my throat operated on for the doctor, who promised to operate on me, left for America, rather than of fear. Being hard up, it is impossible for me to have an operation..." In all probability, the doctors, whom Altmaier contacted, were also immigrant Jews. At the time, America was the securest place for such people. On the eve of WWII, they were prudent enough to emigrate from Europe...

In the mid-1980s, when I was doing my research on Beshkov's archives, the artist was a generally recognized great in the fields of fine arts and national culture in his homeland. Yet, he met Altmaier in days when the recognition of his talent was yet to come. Mrs. Beshkova used to mention Altmaier's awe of her husband's performance. His was not an idle talk, but rather grasping the idea in its depth, analysis of the masterly execution of the drawings. Creatively and personally, Beshkov desperately needed such talks.

In fact, Beshkov's talent won the first ever recognition among the representatives of the artistic community in Belgrade. Both Beshkov and Altmaier were close with that community in the mid-1930s. Substantial ground for the recognition was the guest exhibition of Bulgarian cartoonists at the Yugoslavian capital city in December 1937. Beshkov's participation in the exhibition was outstanding. Critical of



Jacob Altmaier; a photo he presented to Ilia Beshkov in 1934

himself, always doubting his achievements, he needed the howling success. In a letter from Belgrade to his wife of January 3rd, 1938 he wrote:

“Two reviews have already been published – in Politika by Pierre Krizanic and in Pravda by George Popovic – and both are very flattering about me. In the second one I am referred to as “the most master-handed Slav cartoonist ever” and that this had been the best thing ever received from Bulgaria. I know not if something has been published in the Bulgarian press and if our reviewers would have the good grace to reproduce those reviews. No matter how cheap the word “brilliant” is here, still they are unable to devise another about me. Generally, I enjoy tremendous success here. I am terribly afraid and the fear I happen to feel was very helpful to me. Forgive me, Sia, if it looks as though I am boasting now. It is not the case. I am just satisfied and I feel a nice appreciation, a subtle, faint gratification, bright and pure, which for understandable or not that understandable reasons I have never felt amidst Sofia public save for a couple of days. It is a double rejoicing: over my personal success and that of Bulgaria, as they underscore here. Please, do not consider me a maniac, for I am not; I’d never be able to tell anyone else but you about it without being ashamed. Here, in a foreign land, in a foreign milieu I started trusting myself, dispelling though to a negligible extent the agonizing mistrust in myself. Yet, it is me who knows better than anybody else how stupid and inconclusive my works still are. I do not know, Sia, whether you are fully aware of the situation: to harbour, to bathe in an agonizing mistrust in yourself for years now to be able to enjoy for one moment alone the shadow of a satisfaction, yet both that moment and that feeling of satisfaction to remain problematic. I myself am not aware as to why I did not leave earlier, I hadn’t met with any friends whatsoever in Belgrade, or maybe those favourable conditions flattered me, but now I regret it...”

Yes, our native envy never spared any of the real talents. Yet the recognition was prompt to come. Three and a half years ago Beshkov met a friend and a connoisseur of his, Jacob Altmaier. The latter’s admirations for Beshkov’s art made vocal in his letters (1934), happened to be quite encouraging “reviews”. Perhaps this was why Anastasia Beshkova started her work on her husband’s archives from those documents, rather than from any others...

In December 1940, this country’s National Assembly committed a disgraceful act adopting the Law for the

Defence of the Nation, outlawing ethnic Jews in Bulgaria. Beshkov's reaction was instantaneous. He draw *The new tables were submitted to Parliament at a second reading* cartoon (1940).

With scathing irony the artist rejected the antihuman law, which, once effected could result in a tragedy for the ethnic Jews in Bulgaria, a tragedy common for their compatriots from most of the European countries. Wasn't that immediate and sharp reaction of Beshkov's triggered also by his friendly feelings for Altmaier?!

The resistance of Bulgarian society leading to the rescue of our compatriots of Jewish extraction in 1943 was "stuffed" with ideas of personalities such as Ilia Beshkov was. It was no coincidence that among those of Bulgarian PMs who signed the petition the ethnic Jews in Bulgaria to be rescued was financier Dr. Ivan Beshkov (artist Ilia Beshkov's brother).



"The new tables were submitted to Parliament at a second reading," 1940

* * *

The fall of 1987. I was working hard on the archives until 11:00 p.m. at nights, in the weekends deciphering and copying. Xeroxes were a rarity at the time and copiers almost not accessible. *Bulgarski Pisatel* publishing house were waiting for the manuscript. I met editor Mikhail Nedelchev. He was also very enthusiastic, which prompted me to work even harder.

However, the grief that the Beshkovs came to, suspended my work. At first, his daughter fell ill. Cancer! Every time I visited them, I witnessed a distressing sight. Unsuspecting infant Pavlinka was playing at her ill mother's side. Initially, Anastasia Beshkova was unaware of her daughter's condition. When she was told... she could not stand the blow. In end-1987 mother and daughter were dying in agony of the same disease in the flat of the Beshkovs at 13 Yantra St. in Sofia. Alexander Beshkov was nursing them. In a space of 55 days both of them passed away: Pavlina on February 3rd and Anastasia on March 30th, 1988.



Ilia and Anastasia Beshkovs with their children Pavlina and Alexander, 1938

The tragedy was a shock to me. I had an emotional breakdown of a kind.

I put the files with the copies in a cabinet at home and did not even touch them for five or six years. Then the upheaval of November 10th, 1989 and all the ensuing developments came. Everything changed including the book-publishing process.

I think that the idea which incited me at the time will not come to fruition. This partial "comeback" now through documents about Jacob Altmaier was triggered by the world comments on the issue of the survival of ethnic Jews in Bulgaria in the WWII. The press released that on March 11th, 2003 the House of Representatives of the US Congress passed Resolution 77 [108] commemorating the 60th anniversary of the historic rescue of 50,000 Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust.

On May 24th, 2003 I watched different TV channels broadcasting the celebrations of the Day of Slav Letters and Bulgarian Culture in Israel with Bulgarian folk songs and dances. The memory of the noble cause establishes a tradition, which comes as an expression of gratitude and is one of the eternal moral values. A world, infested with such events would really be a more civilized one. No forms of violence would find ground in such a world...

Sceptically-minded realists would say: Illusions!

The idea to rescue ethnic Jews back in 1943 also looked illusionary. Such was the case. Powerful West-European countries with established democratic traditions failed to, not to mention a small Balkan country! What could nurse better the optimism of humankind than the possibility illusions to come true!

* * *

I am aware of the fact that the information about the personality of Jacob Altmaier I gathered is insufficient. New information is to be collected, new researches have to be made. I have no opportunity to do it. This is why I avail myself of the pages of *Bulgarian Diplomatic Review* magazine to trigger interest of young researchers in the topic. As the

magazine is popular in a number of countries, I hope it to arouse interest in inquisitive historians and mostly in Germany, Altmaier's native land. Or even in France or some of the former Yugoslavian republics. We are talking about an active, spiritually elevated personality, who served the cause of peace and understanding between peoples in one of the most inhuman periods of world history.

I deem it my duty to tell the story as far as I happened to get into it.

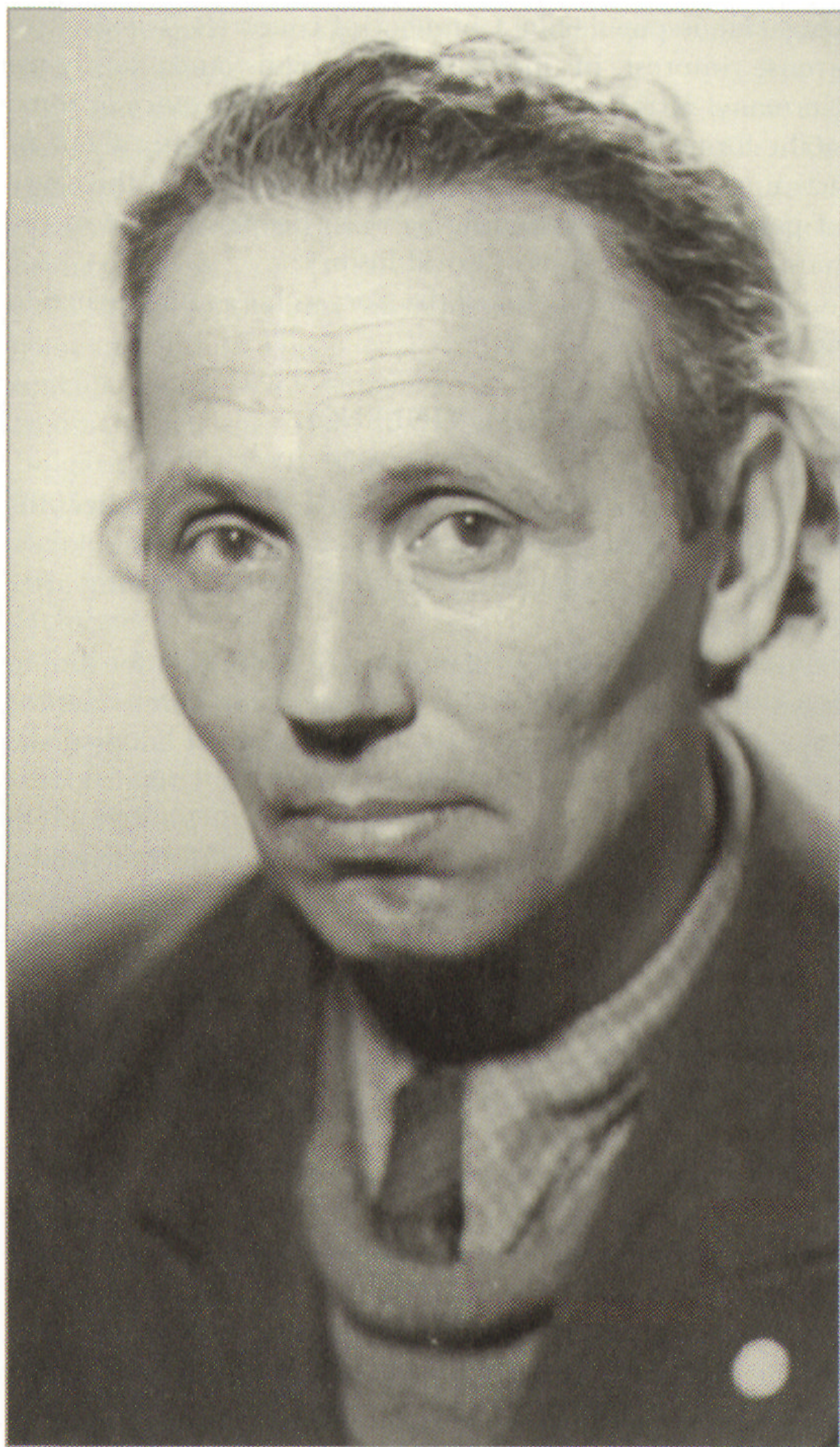
UPCOMING POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN EUROPE

The violence looming large caused Altmaier to meet his new friends in Belgrade and Sofia.

His origin rendered his further stay in Germany after 1933 impossible.

Beshkov's political affiliations were the reason for him to leave Bulgaria and stay in Yugoslavia for three months (April–July 1934). In his early youth, the artist adopted the ideology of the Bulgarian Agrarian Popular Union, led by popular tribune Alexander Stamboliiski (1879–1923). On June 9th, 1923 a coup was staged in Sofia with the ensuing brutal assassination of the Premier, reformist Democrat Stamboliiski. The young artist, being still a student, opened a genuine front against the coup-stagers and King Boris III through his cartoons published by the organs of the Opposition. In April 1925 Beshkov was arrested, tortured and reckoned in a group of detainees slated to be shot down in an alleged "escape attempt". His relatives succeeded in miraculously rescuing him.

Later he formally quitted any party membership, yet he was a supporter of the agrarian movement to the end of his days. After September 9th, 1944 Beshkov was a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts and made an original teacher. A mighty thinker, a great artist and humanist, he was above any party doctrines, moral biases or conventions. Power-vested were ever on their guard when it came to the satirical nature of his cartoons.



Ilia Beshkov, professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia

His creative career was paved with censorial restrictions.³

Authorities showed particular vigilance towards Beshkov during WWII. At the Central National Archives, in the funds of the National Propaganda Directorate, directives endorsed by the Interior Minister, Peter Gabrovski are kept under which inspectors were to be fined for allowing the publishing of cartoons by Beshkov in the press.

The artist arrived in Belgrade in 1934 together with engineer Georgi Vulkov, an early discoverer of Beshkov's talent, who made every effort within his means to create conditions for the development of the artist's creative gifts.

The fellow countrymen (both of them came from the region of Pleven) met each other as early as the early 1920s in line with their affiliations with the Agrarians. Yet their true creative period started when they published together the daily paper of the Bulgarian Agrarian Popular Union, *Pladne* (1928–34). Vulkov was the executive and Beshkov, the cartoonist. The platform of *Pladne* went beyond the immediate agrarian issues. It stood against the newly-sprung on the European arena fascism, against the institution of monarchy, promoting Slav unity and bringing closer Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

Pladne in terms of professional performance topped the ranking of Bulgarian journalism in the 1930s. Publicist Dimiter Naidenov (1896–1946) observed wittily that each morning one buys the daily of one's party as if performing one's duty to one's boring wife. While after that one reaches for *Pladne* as if for a desired lover. To a great extent, the paper owed its success to Beshkov's cartoons.⁴

Vulkov surrounded Beshkov with such special cares and attention that it was hard to tell if the engineer was a patron or a confederate or a friend of Beshkov's. He received him at home where Beshkov lived both as a bachelor and after marrying. Older than the artist by only two years, Georgi Vulkov (1899–1942) took fatherly care of him and his family. "My father," journalist Ivaila Vulkova told me, "was confident in Beshkov's genius. He used to call him Bulgaria's Daumier.



Ilia Beshkov (L) and engineer Georgi Vulkov, 1930, Prague

He used to send him abroad at his own or friends' of his expenses. He had made it a point for Ilia to get familiarized with Europe, with European culture and arts. The artist visited Prague and Paris and was frequent in Belgrade. There, trader Ika Panic took care of Ilia, as he loved him and was very fond of him."⁵

Vulkov never engaged Beshkov in financial matters. He settled such issues with Ms. Beshkova. She kept a number of notes and letters in which he informed her how much money he would either bring or transfer.⁶

The tension in Europe in the early 1930s spread over Bulgaria too. Georgi Vulkov had a foreboding of the danger hanging over Bulgaria's parliamentarism, which could lead to the suppression of opposition newspapers (which was the case!), such as *Pladne*. Would *Pladne* be suspended, Beshkov would be left both without means of living and a tribune along with the other mishaps. That was why Vulkov took to preparations for Beshkov to leave the country in early April 1934. It was planned that during his stay in Yugoslavia Beshkov would draw cartoons of famous personalities, stage an exhibition and earn something to live on from the sales. No exhibition was organized; however the artists spent three months there, while dramatic developments were taking place in Bulgaria. Premier Nikola Mushanov resigned on May 15th, 1934. Four days later (on May 19th), Zveno political circle and the Military League staged a coup. Vulkov's apprehensions were justified: the new government disbanded political parties and suppressed their organs.

The correspondence between the Beshkovs and Vulkov reveals dramatic efforts to rescue *Pladne* paper. Its last copy, dedicated to Yugoslavia ("The Yugoslav copy") was issued on June 30th, 1934. Vulkov was frequent to travel between Sofia and Belgrade, yet to no avail. *Pladne* wrapped up and the dreams of reviving it did not come true.

On June 21st, 1934 Vulkov was in Sofia, sending the following letter to Beshkov in Belgrade:

Dear Ilia, one more week and Pladne, the endeavour we established mostly together with you, will come to naught. You may imagine what feelings have been hanging heavily on me for several days now and those along with the hard work on the Yugoslav copy prevented me from getting in touch with you earlier.

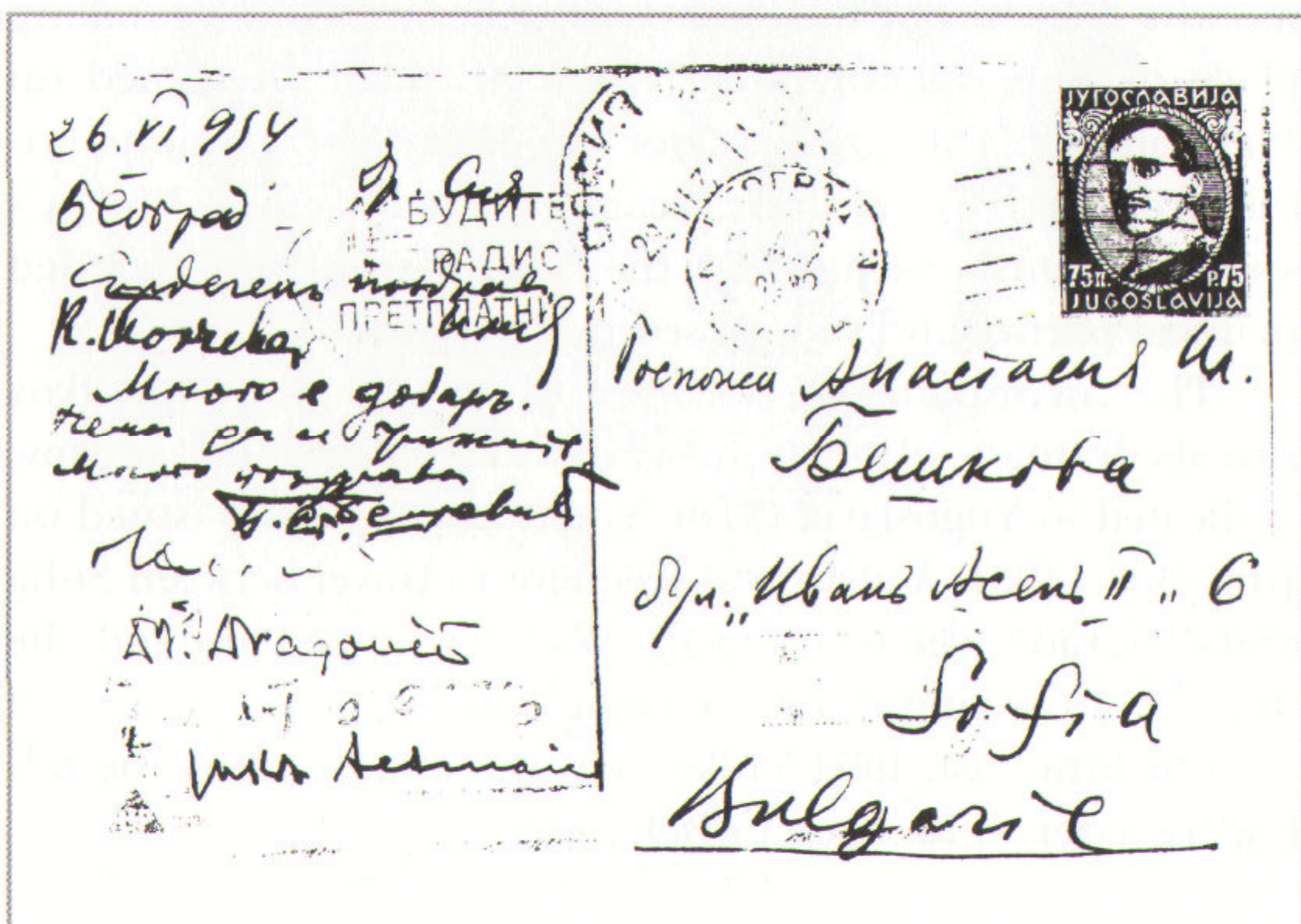
What am I to tell you now? Don't be in a hurry to come back. Look for ways to stay as many days as possible there. I have never mentioned and would not remind you now that we have to start organizing the exhibition immediately.

Nobody knows what developments are in store for us. Still, I believe that in a month or two or three we are to gather once again around the old hearth as it is the only place capable to warm us...

Sia is all right. Many friends are sending their regards, while many scoundrels are hating and envying you. Best regards! Sincerely yours, Georgi.

P.S. The Yugoslav copy without you: I can't even imagine it!"

The exhibition Vulkov reminds the painter of was never staged. Beshkov, like all the greats, could not work on commissions or suggestions. True to his artistic gift, he did not, in the long run, commit himself to the exhibition. In a letter to his wife, he explained his decision:



A postcard sent by Beshkov to his wife in Sofia. For the first time the name of Jacob Altmain is to be found among the autographs to his friends, June 26th, 1934

Many of our compatriots here, as well as my Yugoslav friends want me to stay, to draw sketches, typical renowned persons to the end of an exhibition in the fall. Yet all of them won't understand a subtle difference. Indeed, I had already done some necessary sketches for developing, yet I'd not like to display types of cartoon portraits as I would not compete with Dobrinov (Alexander Dobrinov, M.O.), I'd rather display political and social cartoons, which are banned here and are subject to censorship, as is the case in Bulgaria. People believe that being a cartoonist, I can do anything! Anyway, I do not have to think the way they do, this is not a matter of great import. (July 13th, 1934, Belgrade)

Artist's depression shows. Political violence settled permanently in the Balkans as well. He already enjoyed a number of Yugoslav friends, who autographed the greeting cards he sent to his wife on a regular basis. The card of June 26th is autographed by Altmaier. Writer Vladimir Polianov, who at the time maintained close relations with the literary people from Belgrade, wrote about the "duty that happened to become a basic element of their art". It was not Krklec alone either. "In Yugoslavia," Polianov went further, "tens of poets had thrown away lyres and harps, suns, love and stars to pay their tribute of citizens and free people through art."⁷

Concern, insecurity, depression were part of the atmosphere of the spiritual elite in Belgrade. It showed in Beshkov's letters sent to his wife from the Yugoslav capital. In the excerpts quoted below the experiences of the artist that emotionally shattered his sensitive soul, had left their marks.

June 14th, 1934 Belgrade

Vulkov is to leave for Sofia tomorrow, whereas I am staying with the only intention to work, or rather sketch some types, to develop them further at home (in Sofia) in order to stage an exhibition in the fall in Belgrade... This city is larger and incomparably more interesting than Sofia is. I got tired of getting introduced to some 200 people, all of them interesting and famous persons. Seemingly, man is more highly appre-

ciated here, than in Bulgaria. I am to tell you about the museums, galleries and public places back in Sofia. This morning I attended the dead-office in memory of Alexander Stamboliiski, who is much more esteemed here, than in his homeland. I miss Bulgaria very much. My journey to Dubrovnik is problematic. I have a free fare to the city, yet I am unwilling to go there all alone, besides I am not in the right mood and mindset. I've grown too old to enjoy it. The situation in Bulgaria is very troublesome to me. In all probability, Pladne is expected to be suspended and I am at a loss as to where I am going to find a job. [...] Two papers here are willing to have me contributing to them, yet the censorship is very severe here as well, besides I am not able to take my bearings at all. I am looking, listening, yet incapable of grasping whatsoever. And such is the case with Bulgaria too...



Prof. Alexander Tsankov, Leader of Narodn Sgovor (Popular Accord), one of the masterminds of the coup of June 9th, 1923, embeds a swastika in King Boris the Third's crown. July 4th, 1936.

June 15th, 1934 Belgrade

Dear Sia, Georgi leaves for Sofia tonight [...] We are low-spirited, especially I. I don't need much to grasp the situation and what I've witnessed starts feeding me up and boring me. I have not done anything as yet, but tomorrow I'll have to start visiting those, whom I am to sketch and take notes of so as to develop that later. [...] On Saturday you'll receive some money from the editorial office and if that proves to be insufficient, then borrow, but don't worry and take it easy... I am unhappy with Georgi's departure and in case I fail to find a pal, I'll give up the journey to Dubrovnik...

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I skip the parts where Beshkov eagerly gives tips to his wife how to harden their one-year-old daughter Pavlina, as well as his best regards to friends and relations, and care and responsibility for family problems in general. What matters is that he found a good friend, poet Gustav Krklec, to visit Dalmatia. He sent his last letter prior to coming back to Bulgaria.

July 13th, 1934 Belgrade

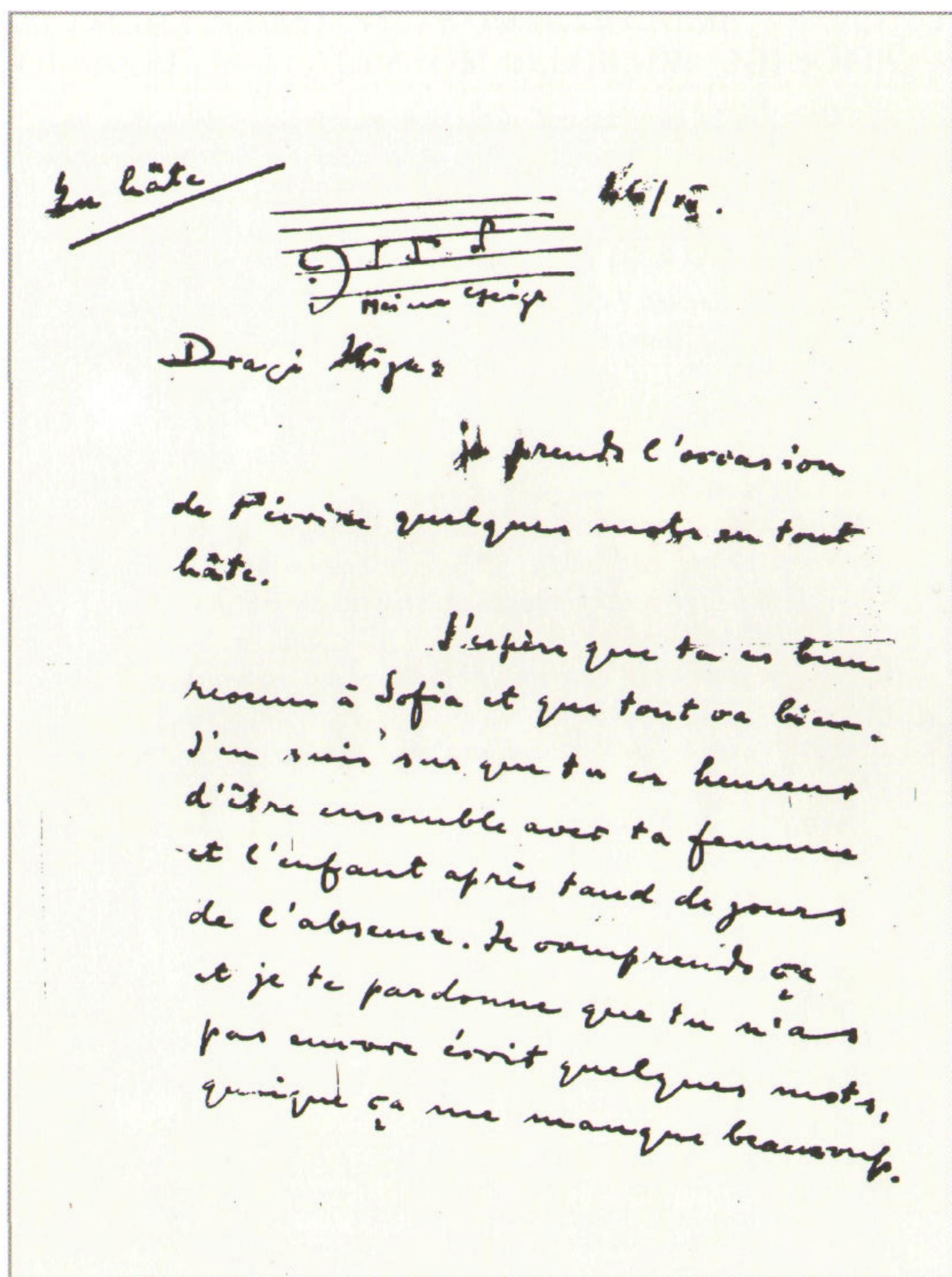
Dear Sia, I came back from Dubrovnik 3 or 4 days ago. On the way back my visa issued by the Yugoslavian mission in Sofia expired, so for 3 days (it was a public holiday yesterday) I had to ask for the visa to be extended, which was finally done today with a lot of formalities. [...] There is something else: I have no money, as you do not, and this is a depressing situation, in which we find ourselves, and the gloomy outlook to find a job and means in Sofia makes me feel very desperate and quite embarrassed. I would not be that depressed, should I know that you, understanding my situation to the full, could be calmer and more lenient. For my fault is not that grave. I have succeeded in building up a profession and a career, which, as all professions are, is subject to crises or bans.

As a matter of fact, the point is in the means I'd have to earn by cartoons and work should I publicly prove that I were neither worthier,

nor more honest nor more high-principled than any other skunk or scoundrel. You know, I'd not be able to work at first. And if I happened to promise you one night a fair living, it was because I wanted to be like any other good husband as I did and do believe to be such. However, that promise has overweighed my conscience and the awkwardness of my situation at home gets even worse. You have to know, of course, that the shortage of money earlier and especially now is not to be blamed on me: I've been working honestly, scrupulously, with courage and dignity, that could be questioned only by skunks be those even our best friends. I'd like you to know these things and not to be interested in the mere, though repugnant shortage of money alone... I left for Dubrovnik later, as I had to wait for Krklec, who had difficulties to go on leave from the Bourse, where he is an official. Those 8 or 9 days I spent in Split, Hvar, Dubrovnik and Sarajevo were a tad too insufficient for those places and I was in a hurry for that long road, because I was aware you would be restless and because I started missing home very much. God willing, as I already got familiar with the road, we could spend next summer sight-seeing together those most beautiful in the world places.⁸

(Don't laugh!) I can work here and make a lot of money; I've already been asked to, however I postponed the conversation until the fall. In Split, I acceded to contribute to Putnik magazine, which they are to deliver to me in Sofia, and was granted a first class free fare for the Yugoslav Adriatic seacoast. So I economized on it some 700 or 800 levs. Hopefully, I'd be granted such a fare in the future, for do believe me, Sia, those who have seen Dalmatia, need nothing more to see worldwide... We hardly managed to meet with Vulkov: evidently he has plenty of work to cope with. Tonight we'll talk about the return, as my ticket is for two, so I'll propose that we come back together. I've been short of clean clothes for quite a while now: at night, I wash my socks and put them on still wet in the mornings to dry up on my feet. I change my shirts once in a great while, insolently making use of Krklec's wardrobe. In case he arrives in Sofia, we'd requite him with the couch as a bed and with whatever we could: he is a nice and kind man and I am sorry for being forced to take advantage of his good nature. As a matter of fact, I am more ashamed of his married sister, with whom he lives and who both of us, thank God, meet only once in a while...

Those were Ilia Beshkov's thoughts and mindset after his three-month stay in Yugoslavia upon his return home. Soon after, he received his first letter from Altmaier...



ALTMAYER'S FIRST LETTER TO BESHKOV

It is written in a hurry ("En hâte") on July 28th, 1934 in Belgrade in poor French, mixed up with German words and the form of address "Dear" is in Bulgarian, but in Latin letters.⁹

It was sent soon after Beshkov's departure for Sofia. No traces of postmarks are to be seen, most probably, it was sent by hand via someone travelling to Bulgaria.

Dear Ilia, I avail myself of the opportunity to jot down few lines. Hopefully, you've returned to Sofia without any accidents and everything is all right. I am sure you are happy to reunite with your wife and kid after so many days of absence. I well understand all this and excuse you for failing to write to me, though I miss your letters very much. Milan Gavrilovic left for Hvar and Kof a day after your departure. I am ever so lonely. Understandably, it is hard for me. Unfortunately, my French is very poor. I do not understand anything in Bulgarian and you do not know either English or German. For all those reasons it is almost impossible for me to write to you and for us to understand each other. What a mishap!!

Now, what could I tell you? Almost next to nothing. Yet, as you are a **poet** and a child, supposedly, you are well aware of my thoughts and feelings. **My heart is overbrimming, still my words are empty.**

Horrendously empty! In the mornings I would go the Ruskii Tus, after that to Kolarar, then again to the Ruskii Tus, you are very well familiar with the schedule. At night I would go back to the Topolites, but not a person, not a person... Emptiness, emptiness! It is almost intolerable.

Krk (thus friends pet-named poet Gustav Krklec, M.O.) and I converse and talk always about you. Krk is ever so sad, so restless that he even ended up brawling with the manager of Ruskii Tus. What a life, what a life! What an agony!

At times we start to sing either "Beffo, Beffo" or "Wenu sie Solruten"... Yet it doesn't work and what we have at the end is the truth of the song: "My violin has no string, the string is missing, it sounds no more, it has voice no more" (the lyrics in the letter are in German, M.O.).

RSVP. I've fallen ill since Saturday.

Luck!

Yours truly, Jacob

This letter illustrates all right the depression of men of spirit, anticipating the upcoming ravaging war. The hard times intensify the feeling of solidarity and need of mutual help. I encountered the name of Bulgarian writer Vladimir Polianov in Altmaier's letters to Beshkov on more than one occasion. A contemporary and participant in those developments, he was explicit that, yes, there were concerns, yet never desperation. The aggressive evil was counteracted with punch and vigour, complying with the traditional principles of humanity.

ALDMAIER'S DESTINY – COMMON CAUSE OF INTELLECTUALS FROM BELGRADE AND SOFIA



37

Gustav Krklec, Vladimir Polianov, George Papazov (from left to right), 1934, Belgrade

I first met Vladimir Polianov on June 8th, 1982 at his home in Sofia. He has turned 83. Slender, youthfully energetic, he had well preserved intellect, memory and behaviour. Full of action by nature, emancipated from partisan cliches and prejudices.

Upon grasping why I was visiting him, he started with a joke:

“I occupied a high position for a brief space of time but in the right time. I could be helpful just in the moment when the friends from Yugoslavia asked me to receive Altmaier in Sofia. I arranged everything so that Altmaier had a wonderful time in Bulgaria, though with not precisely valid IDs. We organized a trip to the seaside for him and what is more important, interviews with Kimon Georgiev and Damian Velchev. He met them in his capacity of a *Manchester Guardian* reporter and everything was all right...”

Polianov studied in Munich and Graz. His fluent German was very helpful to his contacts with Altmaier, who left him with excellent impressions. The two of them got acquainted in 1933, in Dubrovnik at the International PEN congress. The PEN is a world organization of writers, set up in the wake of the WWI (1921). The PEN aims at uniting writers worldwide to promote peace, cultural values and freedom of expression. Bulgarian PEN was established in 1926 under the presidency of Prof. Ivan Shishmanov and Vladimir Polianov as secretary. The organization played a pivotal role in bringing together and getting men of letters to know each other and through them – their peoples. John Galsworthy and Anatole France were PEN members among many others.

At the congress held in Dubrovnik Bulgarian PEN was represented by Vladimir Polianov, viewer Vladimir Vasilev and poetesses Elisaveta Bagriana and Dora Gabe. Emotionally shattered, Polianov brought a sheet of paper with his speech delivered at the closing of the congress. He started reading it to me, warning me that his earlier conversation with Altmaier had influenced him to write it. “We had just got acquainted,” Polianov went on, “and he told me what was going on in Germany, how people were exiled. It inspired me to write the text at one go...”

The speech opened with the suggestion that the writers were there “to promote the idea of international friendship and their views of the internationality of spiritual creativity. The great idea of PEN does not always find its spontaneous expression at general meetings and deliberations on tricky issues. Still admittedly, the very difficulties through which a

consensus is reached are a sign of creativity. Treading all the paths of hesitance, PEN is doing its work insistently and perseveringly. The sentence pronounced by the 11th PEN congress held in Dubrovnik in line with the recent developments in Germany is a sentence passed by a supreme areopagus, emancipated from either racial or national exaltation against the encroachment upon free thought and creativity both in Germany and elsewhere, where such encroachments, such acts of terrorism against men are committed.

Гьоринговиятъ културенъ факелъ

Ил. Бешковъ



Бешковъ
923

"Well, now it is time to illuminate also the Court in Leipzig."

The Vik newspaper, September 21st, 1933

This was why the results from the decisions made at the 11th PEN congress were undoubtedly most significant..."¹⁰

The speech triggered a stormy response. "I finished and one could tell that I'd thrown a bomb in a powder store," Polianov went further. "Yugoslav attendees burst into immense, irrepressible expression of approval, complexions gained colour... Papers almost made my speech the highlight of the sitting. The expression of all those warm feelings, friendly wishes were undoubtedly addressed to Bulgarian people... I think that was the start of a thing which later developed into a genuine, spontaneous movement for bringing closer Bulgarian and Yugoslav peoples. Exchange of visits, staging of exhibitions, visits by different organizations or private persons followed suit..."

40

Incredibly, a pleasant surprise to me: Polianov brought out a letter by Gustav Krklec of July 28th, 1934 on Altmaier's stay in Sofia.¹¹

The letter was brought by artist George Papazov, who at the time had ultimately decided to leave France and settle in Bulgaria for good. He had been raising money to move and fix up in his homeland. For that reason he had been staging exhibitions in Belgrade and Prague, traveling to and fro most of his time. He failed to and gave up his decision. George Papazov was an Altmaier's friend and would render "express services"...

I was impatiently waiting for a break to read the letter. However, Polianov insisted to depict those, who maintained close contacts with Altmaier. Apart from Papazov, Gustav Krklec took great care of him. Polianov insisted to point out that Krklec was a close friend of his own. After his remarkable speech before the PEN congress many people wanted to get introduced to him. "One of them, who gained my affection forever," Polianov said further, "was Gustav Krklec, recently chairperson of the Union of Yugoslav Writers, already departed... Of Croatian extraction, blue-eyed, almost blond, slender, with a charming smile, open-hearted and correct in a European manner... He looked willing to throw himself in the struggle..."

So, that “willing to throw himself in the struggle” poet wrote to Polianov:

Mr. Vladimir Polianov

July 28th, 1934

Sofia

5 Parchevich St.

Bulgaria

Dear Vladimir,

I already wrote you about Altmaier and received your answer; thank you for everything. Altmaier also extends his thanks for your empathy. Now, however, he asked me to approach you once again as a friend for you to answer him as you would answer a friend. The point is that Altmaier is a little bit afraid to arrive in Bulgaria as he is very close here with Obbov, Todorov and other friends of theirs. Could the incumbents bear a grudge against him and create difficulties to him during his stay in Bulgaria?¹²

It would be very hard for him, being a German emigrant with not valid travel passport. This is why Altmaier fears that you could have difficulties because of him. So, please, when you find it possible, answer me to this question as a friend. If no difficulties are expected, Altmaier could while traveling across the Balkans, arrive in Bulgaria to study the situation for the Manchester Guardian and ask the head of state for an interview to shed light on the present political situation in Europe (illegible, Vl. P.)

Such an interview with King Alexander was published in the Manchester Guardian.¹³

Upon receiving your answer, Altmaier will venture on starting for Sofia and approaching you. As for me, I deem it useful for Altmaier to see and study the situation personally. I might well come with him.¹⁴

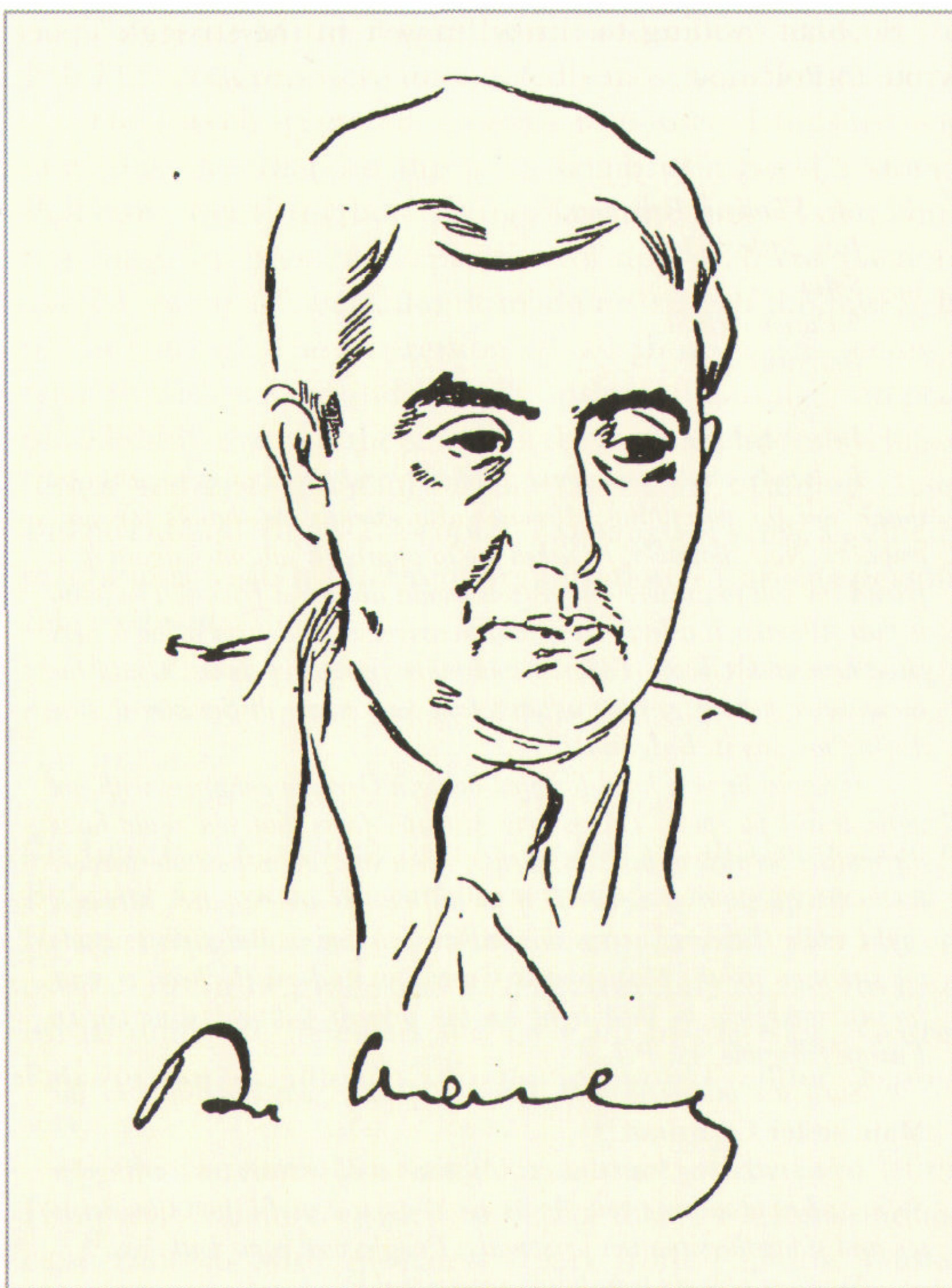
Sinisa is already translating your novel.¹⁵

Most probably, he had already informed you about it.

Here it is the same old story. All wolves send their best regards to you wishing you act in a more wolfish manner.¹⁶

Best regards and all my love, sincerely yours, Gustav Krkalec.”

Altmaier appended in German: “Thank you cordially for everything. I’ll be happy to meet you in Bulgaria. Best regards. Sincerely yours, Altmaier.”



Vladimir Polianov, portrayed by artist Vasil Stoilov

Vladimir Polianov acted fiercely “wolfishly”, i.e. “rebel-
liously”. Without any reservations, he promptly gave a positive
answer to Krklec: Altmaier to leave for Sofia. The immigrant
with invalid IDs was anticipating tensely the decision of his
friends, while they were feverishly doing every effort to make
his departure possible. He had to leave Belgrade for a while.
There were two opportunities: either Sofia or Dubrovnik.
Polianov’s answer was of crucial importance.

The answer brooked no delay, yet the things were not that simple. It took almost a month to arrange Altmaier's arrival in Sofia. Things changed. A new emigrant from Germany emerged, Hans Koester.

From the postcard sent by Altmaier to Beshkov as of August 21st, 1934 (dated according to the postmark) it transpired that embarrassment was hanging over his departure.

My Dear Ilia,

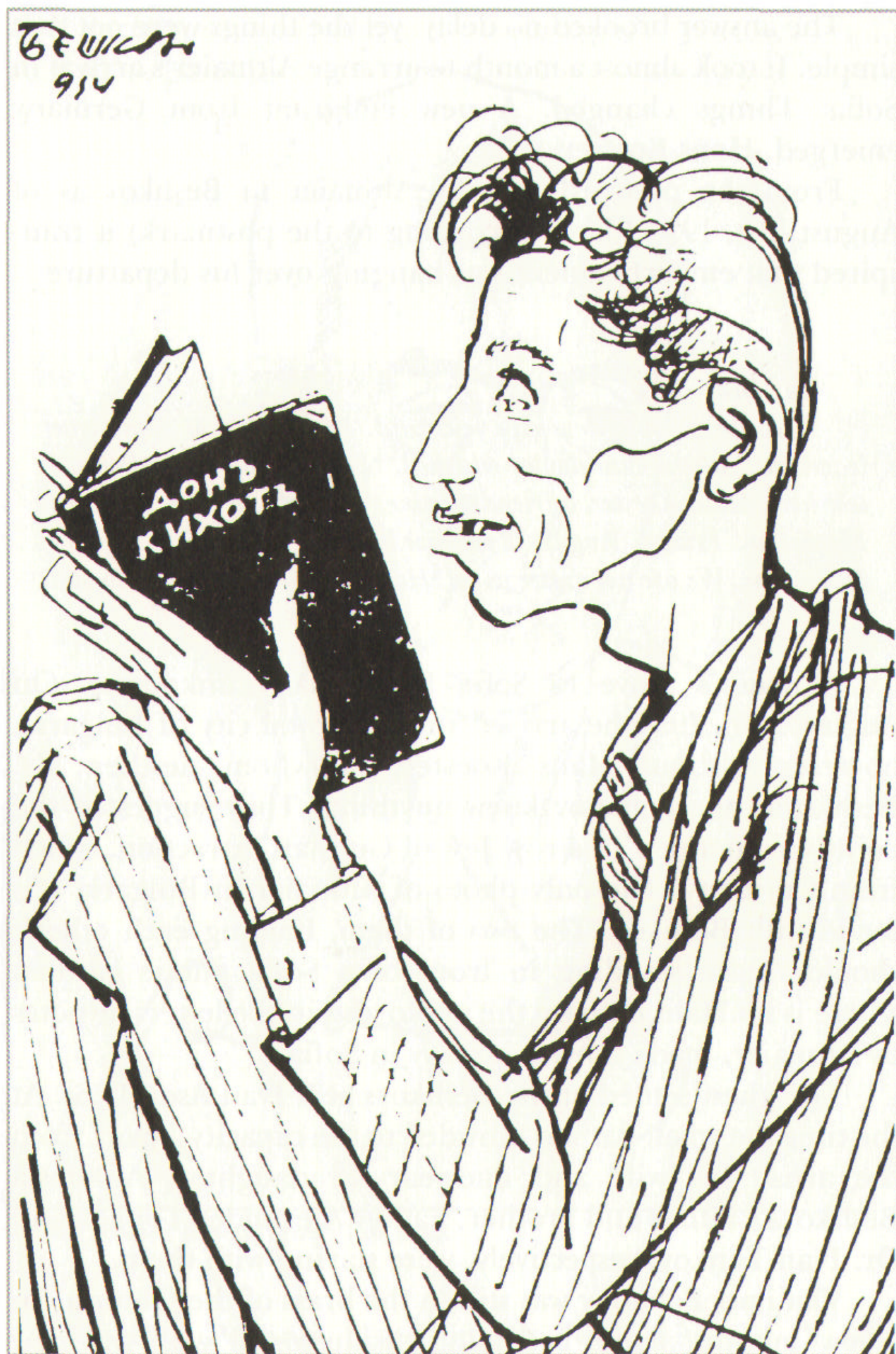
I was very happy to receive your card. The thought of Sofia never leaves me. All the Gavrilovics returned. Now we have a third musketeer here, Hans Koester, a friend of mine, who arrived from Germany. Maybe on Friday, August 24th, we'll leave either for Sofia or Dubrovnik. We are not aware as yet. Hail, yours Jacob, Hans Koester.

43

Altmaier's move to Sofia faced many unknowns. On August 24th, 1934 he arrived in the capital city of Bulgaria, however without Hans Koester, of whom neither Ms. Beshkova, nor Polianov knew anything. They suggested the point was in a new in a row Jew of German extraction, exiled from Germany. The only photo of Altmaier in Bulgaria was made with Beshkov. The two of them, holding each other's shoulders are standing in front of a Sofia public garden. There is no Hans both on the photo and in the letters or notes by Altmaier, made during his stay in Sofia.

The guest settled at the Beshkovs at 6 Ivan Asen II St. At the time the small flat was crowded to the capacity. Apart from the artist, his wife and one-year-old daughter, Anastasia Beshkova's father and brother, Father Alexander Tonkov and Dr. Ivan Tonkov, respectively, were staying with them.

Vladimir Polianov was still in the brass of the Obnova. In a few months alone, becoming disillusioned with the new incumbents, who came to power thanks to the coup staged on May 19th, 1934, he would resign from the post. Now Polianov took care of Altmaier, familiarizing him with the situation in the country and introducing him to Premier Kimon Georgiev, Gen. Damian Velchev and other power-vested. Altmaier was very satisfied with the interviews he made. He spent the nights in pleasure.



Philip Tchipev reads Don Quixote,

The Lik newspaper, April 24th, 1935

He frequented Beshkov's circle: publisher Philip Tchipev, engineer Geeorgi Vulkov, painter Pencho Georgiev, etc. The Divite Petli (Wild Roosters) pub was their favourite place, located in downtown Sofia, at the crossing of Prespa and Graf Ignatiev streets. Over a glass of wine, interesting conversa-

tions were held. Along with the heavy anticipations of the military danger hanging over Europe, the everlasting subject of humanity and its achievements in the fields of spirit and intellect was discussed by the friends. Later, Altmaier was to recall with nostalgia those talks and nights of pleasure. And one more thing: the tour around Bulgaria, the Black Sea coast, where, in all probability, he was accompanied by Philip Tchipev. The journey around the country was carefully prepared yet the very start happened suddenly. Altmaier had no time to warn the Beshkovs, so he sent them a letter. It is his only typewritten letter. It was addressed to Ms. Beshkova and was sent by hand. Here is the letter:

45

A letter by Altmaier to the Beshkovs, fall of 1934

Mme Beshkoff Sofia
et Monsieur Jlija.

Je regrette beaucoup, que je
vous n'ai plus vu avant mon départ.

Je vous remercie infiniment
pour votre grande hospitalité et je vous prie
de me pardonner tout le travail et toutes les
inconveniences, que je vous ai fait.

Je vous prie de me garder mon
bagage jusqu'au je retourne et mon départ pour
Belgrade.

Je suis heureux, que Jlija a
surmonté sa maladie et qu'il n'a plus à
souffrir deux jours de plus.

Mes salutations et mes vœux
les plus sincères pour votre père et pour votre
frère, et enfin pour vous même et Pavlina!

Votre

A.

*En hate, Sofia
Ms. Beshkoff and Mr. Beshkoff,*

I am very sorry for not meeting you once again prior to my departure. Thank you for your exceedingly warm hospitality and do please excuse me for the troubles and all the inconveniences I caused. Please, keep my belongings until my return and pending leave for Belgrade. I am happy that Ilia has coped with his illness and suffers no more for two days now. My best regards and wishes to your father and brother, to you and Pavlina! Yours, A.

46

The letter is not dated. *Madame Beshkoff* is written on the envelope.

Altmaier's stay in Bulgaria lasted from August 24th to mid-October, 1934. On the only photo of Altmaier and Beshkov it is written: "Sofia, October 10th, 1934". On the back Altmaier has written significantly: "To my ever sick man and my never ending illness.", "Ilia, remember yourself and along with yourself remember Jacob." Grammatically clumsy, however the admission of Altmaier of the fact that he has fallen sway to the talent of the great master is well intelligible. This is even more clearly expressed in his further letters to Beshkov...

FALL 1934; ALTMAIER IN BELGRADE AGAIN

Altmaier arrived in Belgrade on October 9th, 1934, when Serbian King Alexander I Karageorgevic was assassinated in Marseille. To the man well-experienced in Hitlerism it was obvious what the terrorists aimed at. Altmaier grieved over King Alexander for he was aware that the king was wiped out because of the change in Yugoslavia's foreign policy in favour of Germany. The murder stunned Europe. In his capacity of a *Manchester Guardian* reporter Altmaier had to report on the situation in Yugoslavia. Being very busy, he sent a postcard to Beshkov from Belgrade via painter George Papazov, who happened to travel to Sofia. The postcard featured the last photo of the already departed king. Altmaier failed to date the letter.

My dear Ilia," he wrote, "excuse me for not finding time to write to you. However Mr. Papazov will explain everything. I am busy from early in the morning to late at night. I made a call to London this morning at 1:00 a.m. I can't help thinking about you, about Pavlina and about your wife.

Best regards to everybody and to you, Jacob.



Telling royal fish stories at Petrovic. King Boris III and King Alexander Karageorgevic.

The Pladne newspaper, December 12th, 1933

The abrupt change in the international situation in the wake of the Marseille assassination and growing tension invoked memories of the wonderful days Altmaier spent in Bulgaria. A lot of things tied him with Beshkov: their views of social morals were similar, their concern over the wrong path taken by the humankind, also. Altmaier stood in awe of Beshkov's artistic talent. However, Beshkov was not only an artist: his gift for music, his skills in playing folklore instruments, his actor's talents and cognizance of word classical arts

were Altmaier's obsession as well. That's why he enclosed in his letters notes of tunes they most probably used to sing together with Beshkov and his friends. The two friends had also conversations on topics from the sphere of most elevated spirituality – a space, inhabited by few. Altmaier sent an imperative call: "You have to take care of yourself! Both psychically and physically. You have to eat, Ilia!!! Bread from the earth and bread from the heaven."

Why this concern about the friend – the genius with a vulnerable soul sensitive to morbidity?! Why "humankind, that predatory brute"... "wends its way towards the chasm with open eyes"? Wends its way towards the war...

48

Altmaier's concerns over frail and weak-hearted Ilia Beshkov were grounded. (The latter did not live a long life – he died at 56.) Yet in his works he succeeded in satirizing and made pointless evil, manifested through violence in all its forms. Spirit overcame physical frailty. The works by Ilia Beshkov in terms of ideas, philosophical insight and creative performance are worthy to be recognized as the heights of world cultural heritage. That was what Altmaier grasped seven decades ago. (Unfortunately, the prejudice of West-European connoisseurs against Bulgaria, located in the controversial Balkans, has not been overcome as yet...)

Such thoughts triggered the longest and rich in information (as well as in facts and mindsets) Altmaier's letter to Beshkov:

October 30th, (1934)

Belgrade

My dear Ilia, I started at long last writing a letter to you. However I am inebriated. I drank a lot of rakia tonight. Why? In order to drown away my sadness. There is not as much water in the Black Sea as are the tears my sadness could shed. I feel sad, I feel unhappy about myself, about you, about the mankind, that predatory brute, wending its way to

the chasm with open eyes. When I close my eyes at night, I already hear the guns and cries of dying children. The world and the peoples are already in the hands of the villains and Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Chris, of that who prayed for peace – Bethlehem, and 2000 years later: the name of an American city where the largest weaponries producing guns and machine-guns are located. We witnessed here, in Belgrade all that horrendous performance, all those official lies. The murderers of the poor king attended also the imposing funeral. Assassins shed crocodile tears and even during the funeral attempted to win out supporters and henchmen to kill millions of people, of poor peasants and workmen. Here is the comedy. And poor people thronged both to mourn and admire the devils in uniforms or Walachian caps.

I also wept about me, about you, about mankind and the king, who was killed by the warmongers. I wept about that poor child, neither a child nor a king, too young and too old, as all the children of our sad and criminal days are. And I thought about your Pavlina, I heard her voice and saw her dancing to the music of your flute. Here it is what is so sad.

You and your wife and all friends of ours had well understood how impossible it was for me to write letters over the recent weeks, as I had a lot of work to do. Fortunately! Yet, I thought often about Sofia and all of you. About the Wild Roosters, about the coffee shop, about Toljanov (I failed to find any information about him, M.O.), about the Boris garden, etc., etc., about Vulkov, Philip, Pencho, etc.

What are you doing, Ilia? You are very sad. No music and poor gypsies are hungry. Hopefully, you enjoy good health. You have to take care of yourself! Both psychically and physically. You have to eat, Ilia!!! Bread from the earth and bread from the heaven.

As for me, it is the same old story. A friend invited me to Switzerland. Another friend asked me to set forth for Great Britain. Maybe I'll go to Paris via Switzerland. Maybe I'll raise money to spend three months in Dubrovnik to write my novel. However, I am not happy with all that. I have only one dream: to stay at home with my family in Mayence, Germany, but it would not come true. I can go everywhere – to Switzerland, Bulgaria, France or England, but I am searching only for my village nearby Mainz. I wanted to see it in Bulgaria, but you did not come with me.¹⁷

Yet, I think that you'll soon write me a letter to tell me about your wife and Pavlina, about Sofia and all our friends. I beg you to give

them my best regards and play on my behalf a dance for Paulina.

I look at your books and your brilliant pictures and I feel so unhappy that you are prevented from accomplishing your strength, your spirit and intellect.¹⁸

The world would need such uncommon men as you – old people and children, men and animals, all those who are so weak, poor and sad.

I myself am only drunk: “Waiter, a shot of rakia—two shots—three shots—The Wild Roosters—Hi, Ilia, hail!”

Yours, Jacob

I’ll write to Polianov one of these days.

Beshkov’s answer to this letter of confession is partially suggested by a preserved but unfinished rough copy. The artist took very seriously written words. That’s why he used to make rough copies. In his archives, the following draft letter to Altmaier was preserved, clearly hand-written in black ink:

November 14th, 1934

Sofia

Dear Jacob, I am unaware of your present whereabouts. I had not contacted you to this day for many reasons. I’ve been trying to write a letter to you in French for a week now and, of course, I couldn’t: I felt ashamed of you and of myself. Hopefully, you have cooled down: the hard events have already faded away and your “troubled soul” is lucid and calm in case you are not ivre (drunk, M.O.) It is a shame that we have to disturb Gustav (Krklec, M.O.) to translate my letter: he is not to blame for our hurdled and mute friendship. Besides, he is young and preoccupied.

It never transpired if Beshkov had finished and sent his letter. Undoubtedly, he wrote to Gustav Krklec, while Altmaier had no message from his “dear Ilia” for two long months. Almost angry, he wrote:

Beograd, 6. XII. 34.

Mon cher Ilya:

comme tu es loin
d'ici et de mes pensées! Aujourd'hui
nous sommes en deux différents
mondes. Tu dois manger, Ilya, tu
dois vivre pour ta famille, tête de
famille - ta vie, ton monde, et
soit heureux mon cher, que tu as
un monde. Moi-même, je n'ai
pas une famille, pas plus, et à cause
de ça je n'en ai pas un monde.
Pour moi c'est mieux de ne pas
manger et mieux de ne pas vivre.

Tu as écrit à Krk. Pourquoi
tu n'as pas écrit à moi?

J'ai écrit une longue
réponse. Pas de réponse. Salut pour lui.
(C'est ennuyeux)

A letter by Altmaier to Ilia Beshkov, 1934

December 6th, 1934

My dear Ilia, how far you are from here and from my thoughts! Today we are in two different worlds. You have to eat, Ilia, to live for your family, head of a family - your life, your world and be happy, my dear, that you have such a world. I myself have no family, I have not family any more and for this reason I have no world of mine. I'd better not eat and better not live.

You've written to Krk. Why didn't you write to me? Besides, you've complained to Krk, telling him why am I not writing to you? You have

*no reasons to say that. I wrote a letter to you. Postcards, a very long letter, I sent you a mouthpiece¹⁹, I sent you my regards via Papazov, via Sancho, via Mrs. O, while **you have not written even once to me!!!**²⁰*

Do you think I have not craved for a word from you and your family over the recent couple of months? You even have had no desire to send me a postcard. At the time I thought and I am thinking it now, that my stay in Sofia had been very unpleasant to you.

Yet, I'd like to know how you feel, what you are working on, what your situation is and how your wife, Pavlina and friends feel themselves. You are well aware that I love Pavlina very much and that I think of your family every day. Is Pavlina walking well now and does she dance to the music of your flute, etc., etc. I think about it on a daily basis and those thoughts are rare and happy oases in the dreadful desert of my life.

Here is my situation: In October I had a lot of work to cope with. In the long run, thanks to that, I had nothing to complain of. Yet psychically, everything goes from bad to worse day by day. My situation is desperate. People and friends are too flippant—reserved and too flippant. I might well go further into the topic in another letter. It would be wonderful for me to emigrate to a better world.

You are the only left of the three musketeers, but you are away, dear Ilia, you have to live for your family and you have to eat, Ilia. Eat, eat, eat and drink a glass of wine to my health.

My heartfelt regards to you, your wife and Pavlina and to all our friends. Feed up yourselves, citizens!

Yours, Jacob

I wrote a lengthy letter to Polianov. No answer. Best regards to him.

Indeed, Altmaier left the Balkans. On December 26th, 1934 he was in Strasbourg, sending from there a postcard addressed to Ms. Beshkova. It was a short one: "O, Strasbourg! Altmaier." Short yet typical of the emotional nature of the sender. There is a view of the city on the postcard and the postmark is intelligible: the document is dated according to it.

Altmaier's movement in the following years is traceable again by the postcards and the short information in Beshkov's letters, when the latter has been abroad. On February 3rd, 1935 Altmaier was in Paris. From there he sent by hand a greeting card at the following address: "Mister Philip, publisher, to Mr. Ilia Beshkov". He was speaking of Philip Tchipev, a close friend both to Beshkov and Altmaier.

And yet another postcard. It featured a view of Geneva and was sent ten days later. It reads: "Dear Ilia, in a week's time I'll be back to Belgrade. Jacob" Then someone's handwriting in German, regards again. The postmark is of February 14th, 1935.

Altmaier dropped a line as late as ten months later, on December 18th, 1935. On a clipping of a French newspaper, reporting about the stay of world-famous Bulgarian wrestler, Dan Koloff in Paris, Altmaier wrote: "Be happy and proud of your country and your compatriot.²¹ Jacob". Then follows a postscript in unknown handwriting in Russian: "Hello, dear Ilia..."

Here ends a relatively peaceful period of time both for Europe and Altmaier, Beshkov and their friends. As early as the next year the Civil War in Spain (1936-39) broke out. Altmaier took part in it as a reporter of *Le Populaire*, the organ of the French Communist Party (S.F.I.O.). At the same time Beshkov created his series *Spanish Chronicle* in Sofia...

ILIA BESHKOV'S MISHAPS IN THE WAKE OF THE COUP OF MAY 19TH, 1934

So far we followed the hard life of emigrant Jacob Altmayer, a Jew of German extraction. Yet the picture could not be finished without a glance, though cursory at the life of his friend, Bulgarian artists Ilia Beshkov. Unlike Altmier, he faced mishaps in his own country. The disaster impending over the Continent posed a threat to the people living in it irregardless of their geographical location.

Europe's wounds from the WWI had not been healed yet

and the Continent faced yet another, fatally dangerous challenges. Mussolini's fascism in Italy, Hitler's National Socialism in Germany apart from instilling fear, tension and insecurity in the peoples, arrogantly imposed violence as a way of "communication". The tone set by leading West-European countries was taken up in the Balkans too. The state coup of May 19th, 1934 in Sofia and the assassination of King Alexander I Karageorgevic of October 9th, 1934 changed the foreign political orientation and the manner of running those countries.

Gradually, the power was concentrated in the hands of King Boris III in the wake of the coup. The Tyrnovo Constitution was in fact suspended. Political parties were banned. Beshkov's tribune, *Pladne* newspaper was suppressed for good...

According to the historical logic, the mishap befallen on Beshkov was only normal. A "normal" fate of a political cartoonist, contributing to an opposition organ. A genuine satirist, such as cartoonist Beshkov is, belongs there. The ensuing political reprisals – the suppression of the party organ – resulted in robbing him of a tribune and earnings. All that was part of the rules of the game...

France, an exemplary democracy failed to rescue its Daumier (1808–79) from censorship and reprisals, to say nothing of Beshkov in Bulgaria!

Georgi Vulkov's fears were justified. Beshkov saw it hard to make his living. In early 1935, publisher Philip Tchipev together with artists Pencho Georgiev, Masha Zhivkova and Nicola Tusuzov ventured to set up *ARS*. They took European companies as a model for execution of commissions in the field of applied arts. Entered in the trade register as of February 25th, 1935, *Applied Arts House ARS* started functioning. However, as Ms. Beshkova used to put it, "bad luck it was". Trade mechanisms had nothing to do with the "arena of heart and soul".²²

ARS failed to bring prosperity to its founders. The

endeavour, however, came as an impetus to Beshkov to create several very funny drawings, featuring the working process of the participants (*ARS at work*, *ARS levels self-criticism*, etc.)



ARS levels self-criticism. Ilia Beshkov, Dechko Uzunov, Pencho Georgiev and Georgi Denev

The Lik newspaper, February 20th, 1935

We get informed about his pecuniary difficulties mostly from the letters. In summer 1935 Anastasia Beshkova stayed at her father's in Dobrich. Her daughter, who was already two years old, was with her. Full of agony is the letter of the artist, who was depressed and nervous because of his incapability to take care of his family. He wrote to his wife:

I can't transfer money to you for I have none and have no way to find any. Make loans, if possible, later I'll borrow from someone to repay. Perhaps I would find in a day or two, but don't rely on that. This holiday could have been skipped (August 8th, 1935).

During the next fiscal year, the difficulties persisted. He wrote to his wife from Belgrade:

I am told you hardly make both ends meet. Hopefully, you have found a solution without me, for I am a rascal, you know. Don't despair of me – it is too early for that. Kisses to you and Paulina. Ilia. May 4th, 1936.

He also saw himself forced to borrow money.

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"I have no money and I am unaware if I could buy anything," he wrote to his wife from Belgrade. "I borrowed from Pierre Krizanic²³ (a colleague of mine) 200 dinars and this is all my money. I'd have to find money to buy a ticket... May 22nd, 1936.

Apart from censorial restrictions and financial difficulties, Beshkov had to comply with publishers' requirements, offensive to his talent. He received the following peremptory letter from the editors of *Kambana* newspaper of September 15th, 1938:

Esteemed Mr. Beshkov,

In addition to our oral agreement we insist to inform you that in the capacity of our regular contributor you shall not contribute any of your cartoons to other Bulgarian newspapers save for Arts and Reviews, where you happen to be an editor. Our best comradely regards. Manager, administrator (illegible).

It is evident that the earnings of the artist were volatile, sporadic, depending on different circumstances and subjective reasons. The financial stability and creative freedom he had in the period of *Pladne* newspaper (1928–34) were already a sweet history. However, tax authorities would not take into consideration the changed conditions. On May 11th, 1937 the artist received yet another outrageous demand, to which he answered with dignity, explaining (from a position incompre-

hensible to the financiers) the nature of his profession of a cartoonist. He spoke of “calling” and “duty”, things totally different from the amount of the tax imposed on him. Beshkov saw himself forced to approach the minister of finance in a letter, in which his situation was revealed authentically. His situation was offensive in terms of a state approach to a rare talent of so wide a scope as his was. The preserved rough copy gives a chance both to Beshkov’s researchers and the researchers of the development of Bulgarian culture in the 1930s.

Esteemed Minister,

In the 1933–34 fiscal year, an annual tax of 400 levs was imposed on me as a painter and cartoonist. The fine added, it totals 820 levs. Today I was delivered a letter of information to pay in a 3-day term 1,400 levs for the rest of the years up to now. For the years 1936 and 1937 I am tax-exempt as a painter in compliance with and pursuant to Art. 2, para 4 of the Income Tax Code.

I claim, Esteemed Minister, to be exempt from the taxes due for the years 1934 and 1935, for I have been impeded as of May 19th, 1934 from freely practicing my activity of a cartoonist and I have no incomes from it to be levied taxes on.

I have not lodged a claim that I have quitted my profession as my profession is a calling and duty of mine. I have not quitted, but I could not publish in the press, I have not received royalties, therefore the tax levied on me is irrelevant.

I hope, Esteemed Minister, that justice, rather than formality would inspire your decision.

Best regards

Ilia Beshkov

Sofia

Such was Beshkov’s life in his native Bulgaria. While his friend Altmaier crossed state borders and survived, destined by his sorry plight of an emigrant, Beshkov struggled for his and his family existence, as the family grew. In 1937, his son Alexander was born.

GRIEF OVER SPAIN IN BESHKOV'S AND ALTMAIER'S HEARTS ENGENDERS DEEDS...

The Civil War in Spain (1936–39) – that most striking event of the 1930s – proved to be a dramatic experience for the world.²⁴

The war broke out in July 1936 with the mutiny of General Franco against the government of the Popular Front and was waged until March 1939. For two and a half years, Spain was marked by deaths and devastations, deceits and betrayals... Fascist Italy of Mussolini and Nazi Germany of Hitler took the side of Franco with their excellent military equipment and armies. That was an arrogant challenge to the world democratic public, which stood for Republican Spain's defense. Volunteers from 54 countries set for the land of



From Spanish Chronicle, 1936

Cervantes ready to lay down their lives in the name of freedom and democracy. Well, indeed, many of them died on Spanish soil...²⁵ The readers would justly ask themselves as to why the subject of the Civil War in Spain brings together the names of Bulgarian artist Ilia Beshkov and Jacob Altmier, the German reporter exiled by Hitler. That's why: creators and artists from across the world were prompt to respond to the developments in Spain: some of them as immediate participants in the war, others through their works. Altmaier was on the battlefield in his capacity of a reporter of the *Le Populaire*, the organ of the French Communist Party (S.F.I.O.). In Sofia, Beshkov created his famous series of drawings and cartoons,



From Spanish Chronicle, 1936

Spanish Chronicle. Working on the archives of the artists, I found a brochure by Altmaier *Sur le Front de la Liberté* (*At the Front of Freedom*, published in Paris in 1938), in which his report from the front in Spain had been collected. So, I understood that though parted by a great distance, the two friends were together in the struggle for democracy. Belief in its human cause is to be witnessed both in Beshkov's drawings and Altmaier's reports. I could imagine their agony when Gen. Franco's dictatorship was established in March 1939 in Spain. A year earlier the author of the brochure had sent an autographed copy to his friend in Sofia. The language of the autograph could well be called international. Altmaier wrote in Latin letters and the words are a mix sounding in the following way: "Dear Ilia, friend, velikoy, salut – napred! Barcelona, May 1st, 1939, Jacob Altmaier."

J. Altmaier

*Дорого Илия, приятел, велико,
Салут – напред!*

Barcelona, 1. V. 38. Jacob Altmaier

Sur le Front de la **Liberté**

**UN REPORTAGE EN
ESPAGNE REPUBLICAINE**

Articles parus dans
"LE POPULAIRE" de Paris, organe
central du Parti Socialiste (S.F.I.O.)

Préface de O. ROSENFELD
Rédacteur en chef du "POPULAIRE"

1938

The title-page of Altmaier's brochure At the Front of Freedom, published in Paris in 1938; an autographed copy was sent to Ilia Beshkov, May 1st, 1938, Barcelona

It would be far-fetched to suggest that Altmaier had already seen drawings from the *Spanish Chronicle* series. Given the then communications, information was difficult to convey. Besides, Beshkov started working on the series almost immediately after the beginning of the conflict. Rigid censorship prevented the painter from publishing his works satirizing the retrograde supporters of Franco and his foreign collaborators. Poet Paun Genov, contributor to the *Mlado Selo* newspaper, kept the cartoon *Spanish Christmas* on a galley-proof as of 1936. A censor has crossed out the cartoon in a bold pencil. I failed to find the original. The work is not popular; assumably, both the print was crossed out and most probably the original was destroyed.



"Pray, daughter, for if you'd prove to be pious, God would save you..." (A cartoon intended for the *Mlado Selo* newspaper, 1936. It was censored. The copy was preserved by Paun Genov.)

Still, *Spanish Chronicle*, this summit of Bulgarian fine arts and Bulgarian political journalism reached public conscience.

Beshkov took part in the 10th general art exhibition with works from the series *Spanish Chronicle*. Both spectators and reviewers were enraptured with the artist's performance. In his review of the 10th art exhibition reviewer Stephan Mitov wrote:

Ilia Beshkov displays a series of cartoons. Those works surpass our usual measure of art; those are performances of a great talent, products of creativity of the first water, rather than surface artistry. Here the means of expression stop being outward elements of the craft, they spring from the very blood of the artist with such a spontaneous naturalness that his cartoons happen to be the only works at the exhibition as a whole, where the pure flame of inspiration burns and form and contents, expression and ideas constitute an indestructible unity.

Literaturen Glas newspaper, October 21st, 1936.

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Once put on a display, it was easier for the cartoons to be published in the press.²⁶

Beshkov printed some of them on greeting cards, designed artistically as a product of the ARS.

Beshkov would say years later:

I was very anxious about the developments in Spain as we had already witnessed the cloven foot of fascism here. The hypocritical non-interference, the heavy-handed support for Franco – all that concerned me personally and I used to draw both furtively and openly.²⁷

Beshkov made the series *Spanish Chronicle* with ardour and enthusiasm. The republican soldier exudes cheerfulness, serenity and buoyancy, being an antipode to the Catholic priest, behind whose back the earth is carpeted with human bodies. The artist's satire is leveled at the foreign "benefactors" of Spain, at falseness and hypocrisy of the Catholic priests, at Franco's supporters, etc.

In their stand on the war the two friends and visionaries were self-sacrificing. Altmaier was on the battlefield risking his life every moment, while Beshkov, instead of drawing nudes



From Spanish Chronicle, 1937

(he was a past master in it!), committed himself to a controversial topic, getting into trouble with the censorship.

One may wonder: What had driven them? The answer may be found in many of the statements made by Beshkov, to whom the power of the cartoonist was in the cartoonist's "honest and brave heart, cartoonists are hunters for dangerous truths."²⁸ That was what made him inconvenient to the authorities.

The artist gives a more precise and analytical answer to that very private issue of his creative laboratory in a letter to his wife:

I have very hard times, I run into the bitterness of life, yet I am not doing this pointlessly: I can't help thinking that I could subject all this to another requirement, to clarify and organize it in a creative work – I intend to draw all that or at least make use of it while drawing. Yet I steer clear of suffering as I do of the flu or cold. But then, why should I ruin my life if not compensating for it through creating another life for the others? (Paris, April 22nd, 1939.)

Believing that he facilitated the establishing of “another”, a “better life” for the others, Altmier was on the battlefield in a foreign land. His experience and actions are traceable in the reports collected in his booklet *Sur la Front de la Liberte*. Here, he is in Valencia. Against a background of beautiful scenery, a nightmare reigned. The reporter reached the shelter amidst bombs and shooting. Women and children were hiding there. Fear and suffering! That day Franco's allies, arriving from Majorca, bombed the port quarter. Mussolini's adopted son flied one of the fighters. They were bombing the slums. 120 houses were reduced to rubbles with 87 killed and 300 injured. That was the “output” of a half-hour work of fascist pilots...

... Here is the almost devastated Madrid. Altmaier was amidst slums – demolished by shells... The battle at Arragon... “Terrible days and nights prove to be even more terrible...”

Yet something new was conceived in that war: international solidarity. The newly built modern hospital in Onteniente came as a result from it. In January 1937 the health establishment could admit 1,000 patients, while now 10,000 could be hospitalized. The Second International ran the construction of the building. Aids were received on a regular basis from Switzerland, Sweden, Great Britain, USA, France, Denmark, Canada, Australia. Even from Italy and Germany which were under dictatorships, donations from workmen were delivered...

... Altmaier was in the International Division. A German was the commandant, and his deputy was a French man. Hungarians, Chinese, Abyssinians, Canadians, Americans, Albanians were serving with the division, united by the idea to counteract fascism.



From Spanish Chronicle, 1937

... In the International Brigade all were volunteers. Here Altmaier met a Bulgarian. A locksmith, who in his native country served in a specialized workshop for motor-car repair.

Asked if he liked Spain, the Bulgarian said: "Wonderful! There is freedom! You may sing the International in the street." His comrade, a grey-haired Canadian added: "I made a lot of money in America but when I heard what was happening in Spain I packed by things and arrived. Now I don't earn much but I am glad I came here. I don't have a supervisor to harass me and I take orders from no one. We are all comrades, working together... Work has become a pleasure for me. At least I know whom I am working for..." (p. 57).

All reports published in *Sur la Front de la Liberte* are impregnated with Altmaier's optimism and trust in the victory of the Republicans. He did not even for a moment think of the contrary, which unfortunately happened. The end of the brochure is indicative of the author's confidence in the final victory. It reads:

"This is the nation of Don Quixote, the nation of the hero devoid of egotism, which is struggling for justice and freedom. The vanquished Don Quixote of Cervantes was a tragicomic character of a dying class, which defended itself to the last minute against the violence and injustice of its masters. And over the centuries the masters presented Don Quixote to the young people as someone you could mock. Don Quixote, who nowadays is fighting for freedom, justice and equality in Spain is the peasant, the worker of 1936-1938, he is not the romantic horseman who dies. This is the modern proletariat, the young giant, the atlas of the future, bearing on his shoulders the progress of mankind.

In 1936 Don Quixote did not ask if there were arms, rifles, machineguns, airplanes or cannons. He only saw the rising injustice, violence, brutality. And with his hands, with his single hands, Don Quixote threw himself on the machineguns and cannons. His tragic-comedy vanished. A monument to him will be erected in Madrid.

The liberated nations of the planet will be coming here to pay their respects."

I have not read anything else by Altmaier except this brochure. Most probably he has other books too. Vladimir Polianov considered him a writer. Altmaier himself, in a letter

to Beshkov mentioned his intention to write a novel. His letters, although coming to us in an imperfect French, disclose a refined sensibility, a capacity for observation and word-painting of events and personalities. These qualities, requisite for fiction, are crucial for high achievements in journalism too.

This is exactly what the editor-in-chief of the Paris newspaper *Le Populaire* O. Rosenfeld wrote in his preface to the brochure *Sur la Front de la Liberte*. He pointed out that Altmaier has the talent to penetrate deeply in the social phenomena. His picturesque reportages made these phenomena accessible to the ordinary people. This series of reportages were the result of his several visits to Spain. It was clear to Altmaier that the Francist army technically outmatched the Republican one. Particularly strong was the Francist artillery. Germany and Italy went on with their military intervention...

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At the end of the preface O. Rosenfeld drew a vivid portrait of the reportage author:

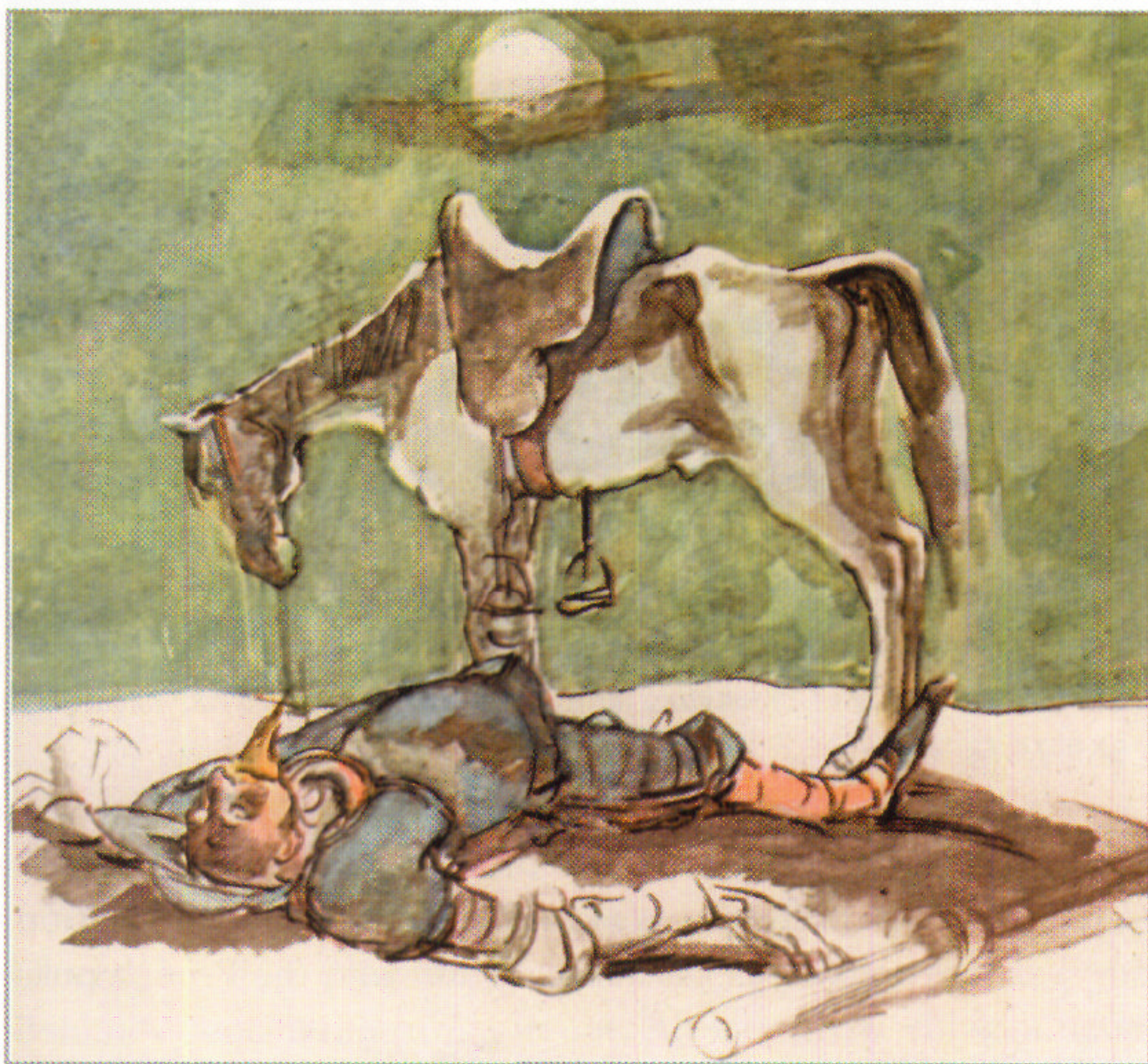
"My friend Altmaier has a good eye. He is able to grasp very well what he sees. With an extreme ease he elucidates in a plain and vivid way the results of his observations. This ranks him among the best international reporters. Altmaier is familiar with many countries. He speaks many languages. He has lived in diverse circles: in Germany, France, England, Yugoslavia, Spain. Everywhere he managed to capture the characteristic features of the moment and explain them to his readers of whatever nationality. Altmaier has the advantage of being a contributor to newspapers in different languages.

I first met him several years ago. Hitler had not come to power yet. Nevertheless, Altmaier warned me... I am sure the present brochure by Altmaier will serve the purposes of this needed propaganda in favor of Spain, because his articles are authentic. He tells the facts as they are and construes what they should be. Paris, February 23rd, 1938"

Before they appeared in the brochure, Altmaier's reports were published on the pages of *Le Populaire*. Their publication in a separate booklet speaks of the significance the French public attached to them.

The artistic achievements of Beshkov in the *Spanish Chronicle* series are evident. They should be viewed in the context of the massive activity of artists from all parts of the world, who took an antifascist stand. The Civil War in Spain was a kind of probe of the world public opinion concerning the advance of fascism, which approached its heyday. It was still very dangerous to oppose it. The American singer and actor Paul Robson, for example, was pronounced a communist and suffered brutal repressions because he had sung in Spain and voiced his support for the Republican army.

Humankind experienced a crucial moment. It was on the threshold of the most blood-shedding event of the 20th century, the Second World War. The antifascist front was already taking shape. Beshkov and Altmaier had taken key positions in its phalanx...



Don Quixote, 1937

The romantic Altmaier described Spain's symbol – Don Quixote – as an optimistic, all-conquering hero. Whereas for the satirist Beshkov, Don Quixote was knocked out on the ground... A dismal foreboding of the outcome of the war, which came true...

PARIS 1939; BESHKOV AND ALTMAIER REUNITED FOR THE LAST TIME

We draw information about the time the two friends were reunited for the last time from Beshkov's letters to his wife. I found no direct traces of Altmaier in Paris. But circumstantially we understand that his life in emigration was mostly in France.

In Sofia Ilia Beshkov won a competition for one-year specialization in Paris. He arrived there in early February 1939. He put up at Hotel de Bresil, but he immediately contacted Altmaier. From the artist's correspondence one gets the impression that he never lost track of his friends, whatever their nationality or in whichever country they lived. For instance, on May 14th, 1936 Beshkov arrived in Belgrade. The next day he sent a postcard to his wife. Its brief text is devoted to his friends:

"On the train I met Papazov (Georges Papazov, M.O.). We chatted and slept long. My Altmaier has left for Paris, Georgi (Eng. Georgi Vulkov, M.O.) for Prague, Krklec was operated on in Zagreb. I found new acquaintances."

Upon his arrival in Paris he most probably knew where to find Altmaier and contacted him immediately. Beshkov was bed-ridden by illness – tonsillitis, suppurating tooth, fever. His letter dated March 9th, 1939 is imbued with an oppressive feeling. Besides the illness (it was the 13th day of his confinement to bed), his scholarship money from Bulgaria were not coming:

"25 days without money, only loans that are hard to get and involve humiliations." He had seen nothing of Paris yet, and goes on: "I have no news of the world's developments. The language of the French papers is incomprehensible, so tortuous and twisted by pressmen's stupidity and diplomatic baseness as the language of the Bulgarian papers."

In this hard time his friend was there for the artist. Mentioned briefly but sufficiently to give an idea of their relations.

"Altmaier is often with me. He gives me courage – we speak of many diverse things. ...Tomorrow is coming an immigrant medical doctor from Austria, who is therefore more affordable but they say he is very good. Altmaier is also complaining of his heart, he had 12 injections..."

As I already mentioned, in his letter of March 12th, 1939 Beshkov gives the name of this doctor, D-r Koerbel, who had to leave for America...

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The living and health problems in which Altmaier helped out Beshkov are one aspect of the matter. The other is hinted in the words "we speak of many diverse things". Beshkov was visited by poetess Elisaveta Bagriana together with two other Bulgarian ladies. "We had a good chat with Bagriana, about an hour," Beshkov noted. But this was different from what he spoke about with Altmaier, with Gustav Krklec, and his Bulgarian friends the writer Konstantin Petkanov and painter Pencho Georgiev. There were others, not all of whom were his longtime friends. In 1935, for example, during his stay in Prague, Beshkov took up with the Bulgarian poet Kiril Hristov, permanently residing in Czechoslovakia at the time. The two were of different generations – Hristov was 26 year older than Beshkov. But this did not prevent them from striking up a friendship on the basis of talks on major universal topics. Upon his return to Bulgaria, the artist sent a long letter to the poet, which reads like a continuation of a dialogue concerning the current issues of Bulgaria, Europe and the world. The dictatorship, bad morals, envy, etc. curb the development, alter the fate of "worthy sons".²⁹

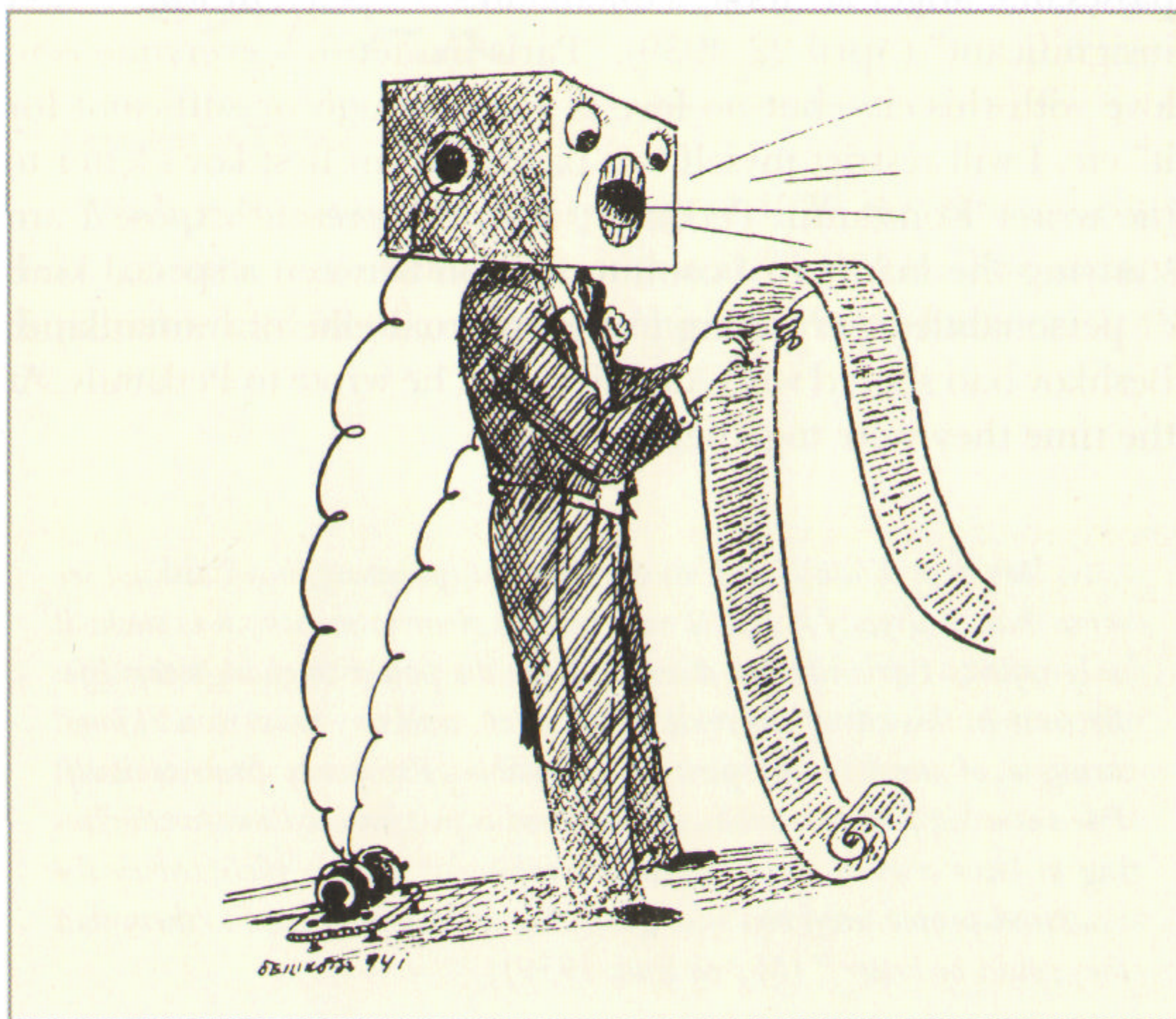
"I have nothing much to say about myself. I do small jobs for half pay. I try to sketch some things for myself, too. It is impossible to work for the newspapers. [...] I am now like a little beast, reacting only when danger comes near its muzzle. We guard our sole life,

and the Motherland, if it is so strong and self-confident, let her give birth to worthy sons. I am not speaking of myself but of those who are beaten, obstructed and forfeited. Evidently, the ease of seizing by the throat the hard-born truth incites the wretched villains to this intoxicatingly criminal activity. And they create. The Motherland. Has any mother cursed her bad son?! The Motherland died, with the souls of her sons. Now we are casting lots for her shirt. I beg your pardon for the dramatic tone. I'd rather joke, as my ex-profession was."

A withering dissection of morals, skillfully made by the expert hand of an experienced pathologist. At about the same time, from Prague, in an unfinished letter to Pencho Georgiev, Beshkov extended the scope of analysis:

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"Europe is indeed confused and ripe for death. A formal order reigns, in which the people are automats, depressed, witless and helpless, resembling calculators." (April 22nd, 1935)



The New Man, 1941

And passes on to the topic of his native land:

"I follow closely the news about Bulgaria. Interesting events, but on the whole they are no surprise to me. There is no country with bigger dupes or bigger scoundrels than Bulgaria. And this is precisely what makes her history at the same time heroic and sad – Balkan drama. Even in the last combination there is a loophole for yet another dramatic act. I love Bulgaria – it is small in terms of land, hardly sufficient for Boris Denev,³⁰ but in terms of dynamism and bitterness – I am happy to be her son and venerator."

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In a couple of sentences we get the truest expression of Beshkov's patriotism. He had the opportunity to leave Bulgaria, to live in the East or in the West. Much has been written about his declination of all invitations. The above quotation is typical of Beshkov's thinking, with its turns, affirmation and negation, the wide range of perception of the realities. And above all with the moral roots of his analyses and reasoning.

Paris, seen through the eyes of Ilia Beshkov, deserves a special study. His enthusiasm for the creators of "this gorgeous city" passes into anger at "today's inhabitants" – "petty, unworthy and insignificant" (April 22, 1939). "Paris is a fetish – everyone is in love with this city, but no love is good enough or sufficient for it" etc. I will restrict myself to a passage from Beshkov's letter to the writer Konstantin Petkanov, as in the present expose I am studying the manner of communication between a special kind of personalities, pertaining to the spiritual elite of humankind. Beshkov had shared with Altmaier what he wrote to Petkanov. At the time they were together in Paris.

"My dear Kosta, [...] I saw modern art (painting) but I did not see more than I already knew. It only became clear to me why it is such. It only reflects Paris life but does not have the power to change this life. Because in this city of liberty it is forbidden, and any braver and honest struggle of the human spirit is impossible. Prosperity protects itself. Paris is a big funeral, where the deceased is just an occasion for the living to have a good meal and merrymaking. Virtue is included in the law, and people are good – so good that it does not occur to them that they could be better." (March 2nd, 1939)



"... Now at least you'd belong to nobody else!" 1944

With the coming of the spring of 1939 the tension rose. Four months to go before the outbreak of WWII. The anxiety is palpable and Beshkov wrote to his wife from Paris on April 22, 1939:

"Sandbags are unloaded at the hotels and at all houses and put in the attics to somewhat neutralize the destructive effect of the bombs. Gas masks will be handed out, too. In the streets brochures have been on sale for 7-8 days now – with instructions to the foreigners to determine their behavior in the event of war. Those who do not leave France within several hours shall be obliged to join the army. Many of us obtained a Swiss visa. By 27-29 this month it will be known whether there will be war. Personally I don't believe the war will break out before the autumn, but

nobody knows anything for sure. [...] You know, the situation is so confusing that it is impossible to work. I intended to get an atelier or at least a special table, inks, brushes, etc. etc. but any moment I may have to abandon them and the money would go to waste. And what would I be painting anyway? I don't have peace of mind. [...]

What cruel and treacherous time – in times like this one loses his best, bright, pure and noble feelings. One only demands and defends – and this is humiliating, unworthy and unbearable. The whole earth is populated by beasts. Mankind like this cannot be saved!”

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The last sentence coincides with what Altmaier wrote in his letter from Belgrade of October 30th, 1934. I will take the liberty to repeat it: “The water in the Black Sea is less than the tears I could cry in my grief. I am sad, I feel sorry for myself, I feel sorry for you, I feel sorry for humanity – this predatory animal, walking with open eyes towards the abyss.”



“Pierre, let's fix the head onto the shoulders.”

“It is old-fashioned, Marshal, I'm searching for a better place....!”

Sturshel paper, February 7th, 1941

Perfect unanimity of the two friends on the then prevailing world system. They contested it not only in words. Negation of all its forms and manifestations are present in the numerous anti-war cartoons by Beshkov, which are remarkable as artistic achievement and civil position.³¹

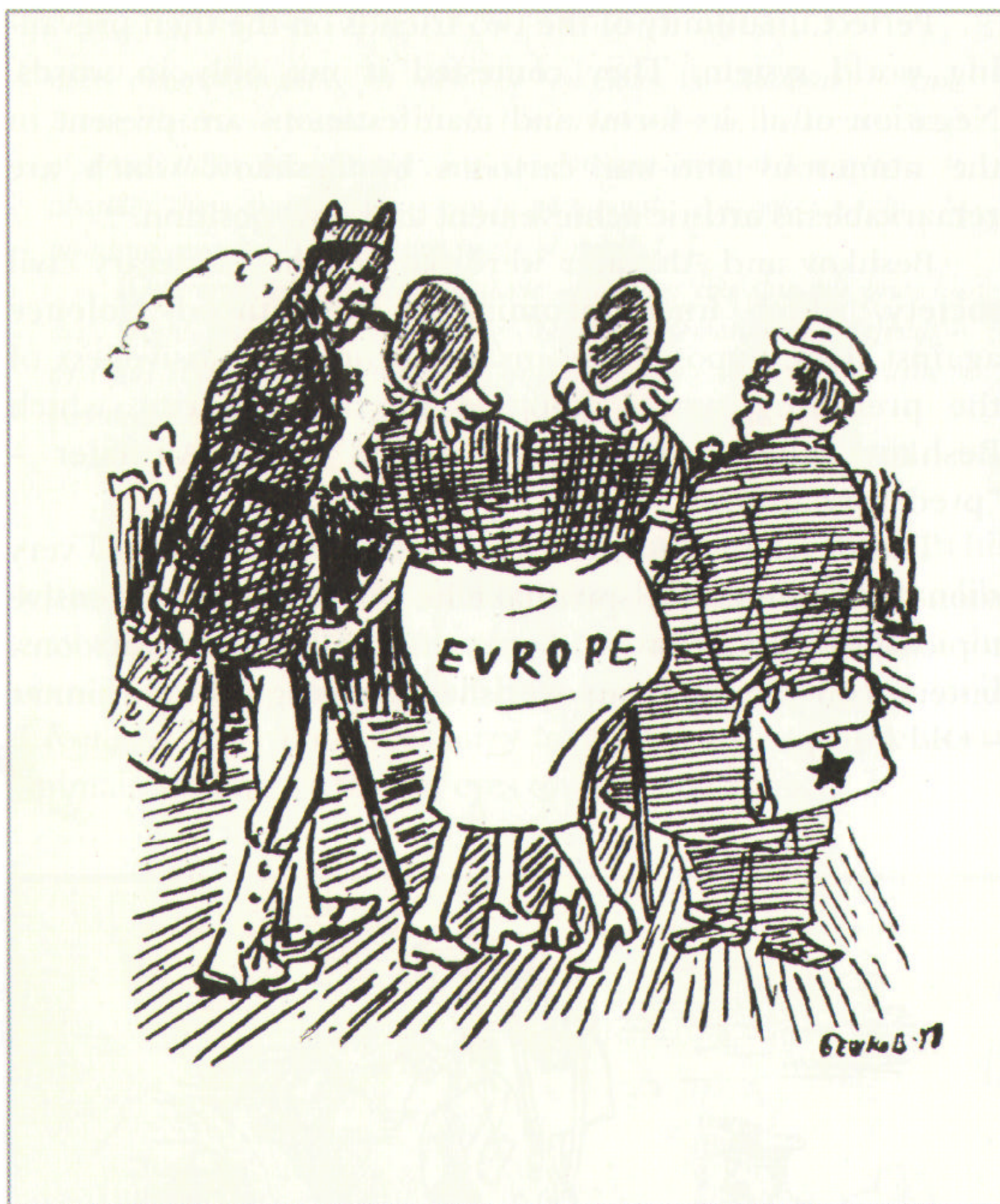
Beshkov and Altmaier were part of the planetary civil society, which uncompromisingly denounced violence against man, exposed the insane, brutal aggressiveness of the prevailing system imposed by the minority, which Beshkov called “unsavable mankind”, and Altmaier – “predatory animal”.

The developments after the end of World War II very soon disappointed the spiritual elite worldwide. An extensive topic which had a convincing presence in Beshkov’s cartoons, bitterly ridiculing the impoverished, begging, divided sinner – Old Europe...



Meeting of the Big Three (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin)

The Shturmovak (Storm-trooper) newspaper, July 14th, 1945



The European issue is not that hopeless...

The Narodna Mladezh newspaper, October 18th, 1948

DIVIDED EUROPE ESTRANGED THE FRIENDS AS WELL

*"Robbing life
of friendship is like robbing
the world of the sun."*

Cicero

I do not know how Altmaier lived during the Nazi occupation of France. Beshkov left the country beforehand. Instead of one year, he stayed in Paris for nine months. In

Bulgaria, together with his family he endured the hardships of the war. The crisis, the air-raids on Sofia, the evacuation, and hardest of all – the parting with friends were indeed an ordeal for the artist. With letters and telegrams he looked for the people with whom he had long-standing spiritual communion. After the air-raids these were scattered all over the country. To top the unpleasant experiences came the bomb, which destroyed the family home at 13, Yantra St.

Altmaier survived the war. This became known too late. Because in post-war Europe a new system was established, carrying the persistent enmity that came out intact. The motto of the Second International (to which Altmaier belonged) Freedom, Justice, Solidarity did not materialize. On the contrary, the world was divided into two hostile camps, the capitalist and the socialist. War was waged without a front. A new notion was born – Cold War.

The consequences for the people were devastating. Families and kin were separated, let alone friends! Distrust and suspiciousness reigned.

Beshkov and Altmaier knew nothing of each other. Until one day the news-bulletin of the People's Republic of Bulgaria *Volksrepublik Bulgarien*, No 5, 1955 fell into the hands the Bundestag deputy Altmaier. This issue carried a feature story about the master of cartoons Ilia Beshkov. Strongly agitated, in the margin next to the title Altmaier wrote a heartfelt greeting: "My sincere friend Ilia, regards from Jacob Altmaier, Bonn, December 1955." On a letter paper of the Bundestag we find a very brief message: "Dear Ilia! I salute you from all my heart. Send me a word. Yours, Jacob. December 19, 1955." This is the last trace.

"One word!" Beshkov refrained. Could it be otherwise?! Personal contacts between people from the two camps were usually tantamount to state treason. Restrictions! What happened with the spiritual elite of Europe?! Was the post-war world really democratized?!

*Das Ganze nur: nur
zu sehen!*

MEISTER DER KARIKATUR ILIJÄ BESCHKOW

*Meinere grove mit
geliebter Ilija
mit einem*

*Jakov Altmaier
Bonn, Dec: 1955.*



BESCHKOW

Die progressive bulgarische Karikatur hat eine Reihe begabter Vertreter, von denen Ilija Beschkow an erster Stelle steht. Es gibt in Bulgarien keinen fortschrittlichen Menschen, der nicht die Karikaturen, Zeichnungen und Illustrationen dieses ungewöhnlich scharfsinnigen und witzigen Karikaturisten kennt. Die Werke Beschkows zeichnen sich durch die weiche und äußerst ausdrucksvolle Linie der Zeichnung aus. Durch diese Linie gelangt er zur Plastik, zur Gestaltung in drei Dimensionen. Doch die Meisterschaft Beschkows besteht nicht nur in der plastischen Vielseitigkeit. Seine Kraft wurzelt

gedruckt und bereits damals bestimmte er die Linie seines Schaffens, das dem Volke, seinem Leiden und Ringen nahestand. In den Jahren der monarcho-faschistischen Diktatur in Bulgarien waren die Werke Beschkows für die Werktätigen eine Stütze in ihrem Kampf um nationale Unabhängig-

From the Volksrepublik Bulgarien news-bulletin, issue 5, 1955; a feature story about Beshkov and a short message from Altmaier

**ABGEORDNETER
des Deutschen Bundestages**

Jakov Altmaier

BONN
Bundeshaus

19.12.55.

Fernruf 20141 (Ortsverkehr)
20151 (Fernverkehr)

Dragi Ilija!

*Je te salue de tout
mon cœur!*

Enviroy un mot

*Ton
Jakov*

The last Altmaier's letter to Beshkov, December 19th, 1955, Bonn (Germany)

Questions to which personal answers are given.

The period of the Cold War has been and will be an object of study by more than one generation of historians. There is a risk that concentrating on the global issues of interstate relations we may lose the “details” of “insignificant” facts similar to the case Beshkov–Altmaier. Given today’s numerous institutions, which profess the obligation to observe human rights, such omission would not be justified. Because, to allude to Cicero, this would be equal to not bringing to book even historically the culprits who robbed the world of friendship – of the sun.

I hope this will not happen. The personal dramas of “robbed friendships” should be remembered and be an important lesson to the coming generations!



Ilia Beshkov. *Dream (Self-portrait)*, 1947

NOTES

¹ This was how his Bulgarian friends called him. He himself spelled his name as Jacob Altmair.

² A newly established Directorate for Social Renovation, subordinate to the PM, special publicity organization.

³ In his *Insomnias* (1992, 106), Stephan Popov (1906–89), an immigrant to West Europe in the wake of the coup of September 9th, 1944 wrote: “Ilia Beshkov, that soaked in rebelliousness leftist, contributed cartoons of his to the *Utre* (Tomorrow) newspaper, which was deemed to be a nationalist-rightist one; those cartoons were not passed by the ‘monarchic’ censorship.”

I copied the following letter from Beshkov’s archives: “Esteemed Mr. Beshkov, on my behalf and on behalf of my comrades I beg your pardon for the impossibility to publish your otherwise very good cartoon in *Izgreu* (Dawn). Our inconvenience is of tactical rather than of any other nature. Hopefully, you would not make an issue of it and would not refuse us your further highly appreciated contribution in the future. Best regards (Signature illegible, dated March 1st, 1934.)

⁴ Years later, Vulkov recalled: “...there were a number of people who preferred a political cartoon by Beshkov to any lengthy otherwise editorials by whomever...” (The *Sofia* newspaper of June 6th, 1938).

⁵ The conversation was held at Ivaila Vulkova’s on October 21st, 1986.

⁶ Even after the *Pladne* daily ceased publication, Vulkov went on collecting the artist’s fees and royalties as well as dealing with other tiresome activities. I’d restrict myself to the following message, written at the time of Beshkov’s stay in Paris: “Sofia, March 1st, 1939. Sia, I’ve been spending the last three days visiting Police stations. Victor (his son, M.O.) fell ill... That’s why I could not call on you. I am making every effort to collect Ilia’s dues and I do hope to arrange this annoying matter. I’m leaving 1,800 for you to enter them in the book... Best regards – Georgi.” Georgi Vulkov was death-sentenced for his anti-fascist activities and was sent to the gallows on April 10th, 1942.

⁷ Polianov, Vl. *Behind the Curtains of Theatre, Literature and Public Life*. S, 1997, p. 169.

⁸ That family voyage Beshkov dreamt of never happened.

⁹ It was fine art reviewer Tania Yordanova who translated the letters for which I express my heartfelt appreciation. Perfectly mastering French, she was able to grasp the meaning even in cases of misspelling. This letter has been written in green ink on luxury blue paper. I wrote down the translation without either editing or looking over it. In the upper margin, above the

address, Altmaier had written the initial notes of the song *My Violin*, which he and Beshkov, along with their set used to sing in Belgrade.

¹⁰ Years later, I read Polianov's whole speech in his book *Behind the Curtains of Theatre, Literature and Public Life* (S, 1997, pp. 161–162). I thoroughly looked for the name of Altmaier, but never found it in the book.

¹¹ A typewritten translation into Bulgarian by Polianov. The original was not available.

¹² The point is about Bulgarian Agrarian leaders Kosta Todorov, Alexander Obbov, etc., close Beshkov's friends, who have immigrated to Yugoslavia. Altmaier happened to become their friend thanks to Beshkov.

¹³ Yugoslavian King Alexander Karageorgevic (1888–1934) pursued pro-French policy. He was killed together with Foreign Minister of the Third French Republic, Louis Barthou on October 9th, 1934 in Marseille by a pro-Hitler apologist.

¹⁴ Gustav Krklec arrived not in Bulgaria together with Altmaier.

¹⁵ Sinisa Paunovic translated into Serbian the novel *Black Never Turn White* (published in Sofia in 1932). The preface to the Serbian edition, published in Belgrade, was written by Paunovic.

¹⁶ It was Vladimir Polianov who told me that the society of the so-called “wolves” existed in the 1930s in Belgrade. It brought together young intellectuals, democrats, revolutionaries, irregardless of their nationality or religion or social background. Members of the society were Gustav Krklec, Dr. Vuk Dragovic, Nicola Besovic (artist), Vladimir Polianov, Altmaier among others. They had a charter calligraphically handwritten on classy paper. Many of the “wolves” were killed in the Resistance against Hitler in the WWII. When I asked Sinisa Naumovic to elaborate on the “wolves”, he smiled sceptically, saying: “Nationalists! Forget them!”

¹⁷ Erroneous expression. Most probably, Altmaier and Beshkov had an arrangement to visit the native village of the artist (Dolni Dubnik, Pleven region), but they failed to.

¹⁸ The first album of Beshkov's works was published in 1938. In all probability, Altmaier owned drawings by the artist as well as books illustrated by the latter.

¹⁹ In Anastasia Beshkova's opinion, no such present has been made.

²⁰ Bolded by the author of the letter.

²¹ Dan Koloff, born Doncho Kolev (1892–1940), a catch-as-catch-can wrestler.

²² A Beshkov's expression from his letter to his wife (Paris, June 6th, 1939): "... good, beauty and truth lie in the victory of art: they are available nowhere else. Heart and soul are only an arena for this deadly, merciless war."

²³ Yugoslavian cartoonist Pierre Krizanic highly appreciated Beshkov's talent. He wrote: "Beshkov's is a great talent, strong, rich and profound. He is great both as a cartoonist and artist. There is no other like him. Beshkov is very popular in our country. Everybody appreciates him; everybody loves him as a friend. Bulgaria is privileged to have such a talented artist." (The *Danas* daily, October 11th, 1938).

²⁴ Academician Andrei Sakharov wrote: "Strangely, 45 years have elapsed since the Spanish Civil War, yet the agitation and agony have not faded in the hearts and souls of the boys and girls of the age. There was an enchanting strength in them, it was the real thing: a romantic, heroic side of the struggle (or perhaps an anticipation of what fascism would bring in its wake)." (*Memoirs*, S, 1998, p. 36)

²⁵ American writer Earnest Hemingway, participant in the Spanish Civil War, wrote in 1939: "And as long as all our dead live in the Spanish earth, and they will live as long as the earth lives, no system of tyranny ever will prevail in Spain. no men ever entered earth more

honorably than those who died in Spain..." (Ernest Hemingway, *On the American Dead in Spain*)

²⁶ In newspapers *Posleden Chas* of October 19th, 1936; *Literaturen Glas* of October 21st, 1936; *Nova Kambana* of December 20th, 1937, etc.

²⁷ *Beshkov's Word*. S, 1973, p. 208.

²⁸ *Beshkov's Word*. S, 1973, p. 220.

²⁹ Beshkov's letter to Kiril Hristov of August 14th, 1935 is kept at the Central State Archives, f. 132, op. 1. a.e. 402.

³⁰ He is referring to the landscapes by painter Boris Denev (1883–1969), featuring beautiful sceneries of Bulgaria.

³¹ Some of their subjects are borrowed from French political reality. *Vichy-Paris controversy* cartoon *Sturshel* newspaper, February 7th, 1941, was created after Marshal Petain signed a disgraceful armistice with Germany. French statesmen Marshal Petain and his Minister Pierre Laval are carrying a broken, once graceful statue of France. The Marshal suggests the head to be fixed onto the shoulders, where it belongs. However Laval with a cynical grimace says: "It is old-fashioned, Marshal, I'm searching for a better place...!" A ridiculous decision, by which the artist makes vocal his concerns over the moral and spiritual principles of humankind jeopardized to degrade.

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Maria Ovcharova
BESHKOV AND ALTMAIER
Fragments of a Friendship 1934–1955

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BESHKOV and ALTMAIER is a documentary about the dramatic friendship between two elevated in terms of intellect, morals and spirit creators. In the spring of 1934 the exiled from Nazi Germany journalist of Jewish extraction, Jacob Altmaier and Bulgarian painter and cartoonist Ilia Beshkov, forced to leave his native country met in Belgrade.

Democratic Europe stiffens in fear of the ever growing power of the dictatorships. The intellectual elites of the world stand against the aggression. Beshkov and Altmaier are part of that global civil community.

In the wake of the WWII we find Altmaier in Bonn, an MP in the Bundestag, while Beshkov is a professor at the Sofia Academy of Fine Arts. Locked in two systems at enmity, the two friends are separated for good.



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